THE
COLLECTED
SHORT FICTION
LAIRD BARRON

The
Collected Short Fiction
Of
Laird Barron

An index is available *here*.

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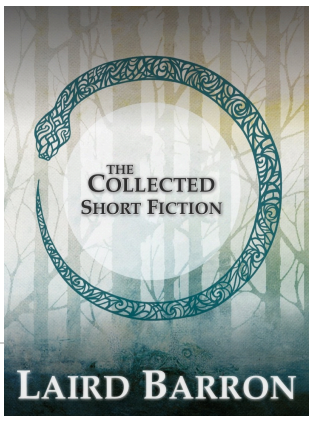
Hour Of The Cyclops



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I quickly opened the door scriven with a ghastly orange symbol, and stepped through. Everyone in the cell was frozen at my unwelcome appearance. I shot the man to the left of the Ancient Apothecary. I shot the man to the right of the Ancient Apothecary. The Ancient Apothecary motioned with his unclean hand—a motion suspiciously akin to the loathsome symbol splattered against the door. I fell down. A curtain settled over my eyes.

Well, next time I'd shoot the Ancient Apothecary first.

They made me talk.

"Here to rescue the virgin, hmm?" The Ancient Apothecary petted his sinister imperial.

"Or deflower her trying." I saw they had confiscated my array of devices lethal and malign. A wild-looking man was playing with them. He hunched, raptor-like, chuckling. I dangled from rusty chains wrapped around the meaty portion of my forearms. It was cold, and water gurgled against rough stone. No virgins anywhere.

The Ancient Apothecary was neither withered nor desiccated. Thick and supple as a mature bull walrus, his eyes gleamed friendly spite. "Mr. Rembrandt?" He certainly did not talk like any heathen cultist I knew—more through the nose like a snobby English professor.

"Sure." I kind of shrugged. The chains creaked.

The Ancient Apothecary—whom I was amply warned to beware—smiled an evil smile. My phony identification shined betwixt his spicate fingernails. "So, Mr. Rembrandt, what is the deal with your blood?" He was

a scientist, and any scientist in the world would have been smitten with that riddle.

I laughed. Our doctors were sensitive to the manifold hazards of this little assignment. Among other precautions, they siphoned the blood from my body, replacing the tired stuff with Yellow Ichor No. Five. It was experimental, but that didn't bother me. Drs. Chimera and Sprague had done all the usual tests on primates and captured operatives. I was the first agent to use it in the field, and so far so good.

The Ancient Apothecary laughed also. He ceased laughing and spoke rapidly in a language offensive to my ears. A pair of spindly surgeons emerged from the shadows; ivory cloaks shuttering—death-white carapaces of hunting beetles. They reeked of charnel; their nails were crusty. One stabbed my neck; the second stabbed the vein in my groin. Their horse syringes soon brimmed with ocher gel. The vile surgeons scuttled from whence they came. I gasped and panted, at a loss for proper curses.

The Ancient Apothecary petted the oily crescent of his mustache. He trundled a circuit around my hanging body. "Whatever the secret of your wonderful elixir, my minions shall soon know it. Ho! And what is this scar at L-five, progressing in a cruel groove to vanish under thy cranial canopy?"

"Cosmetic surgery."

"Most suspicious, most alarming."

"Indeed. But enough about me. Don't you have a virgin to sacrifice?"

"Heh, heh!" The Ancient Apothecary bobbed his anvil head. He had been sneaking glances at his watch. "True, my dear child, very true. Are you a believer then?"

"No. I just do what I'm told."

"Ah. What are your instructions?"

"Rescue the girl. Kill you."

"I am sorry to thwart your plans. Much as I sympathize with your predicament, I cannot relinquish the Virgin Offering. When the stars fall into their proper design I shall render the Virgin, and Lord Cyclops will rear above the gelid sheets of His living tomb. We who revere the Lord of

Shadow shall caper upon the squirming mound of our enemies; we shall light the great fires to welcome the Father of Decay as he lumbers forth to bellow cataclysm and ravish the earth!”

“Super,” I replied.

“But I must appease the worms of curiosity—did the Church send you? Officious catamites! They meddle in my affairs with egregious determination.”

“If you must know, then you must know. However, also know that I will happily die rather than divulge that information.”

“Well, there will be nothing happy about it, Mr. Rembrandt! I will give you pain and suffering of legendary measure!”

Again I laughed. “Pain means nothing to me. Do your worst.”

“So be it.” The Ancient Apothecary clapped twice like an imperious rajah in a bad old film.

“Mr. Spot! Please visit our guest with the best torments your febrile brain can devise!”

Which is exactly what he did.

As I expected, the Ancient Apothecary grew bored and left to check on his project. I thanked the stars—it was unlikely that my trick would affect him.

After he had gone, I stopped screaming and regarded the one called Mr. Spot. Yes, I remembered him from the file picture. Not very charming in the flesh, either. “Mr. Spot,” I said to gather his attention. “Mr. Spot, would you look at me for a moment?”

The ugly man paused in his ministrations. “Why did you stop screaming?”

“Because I need to tell you something. Listen.” I began the vocalization of a particularly nasty and profane string of syllables. This triggered Dr. Sprague’s autohypnotic suggestion; my head lolled, my bowls heaved and expelled concomitant with glottal constriction. A membranous capsule came into contact with my teeth. I chewed; I regurgitated a cloud of virulent green gas.

Mr. Spot was pretty much dead by the time I shuddered awake. I half expected the horrible little surgeons to appear. They didn't. It only required a few seconds to be free of the chains and when I was, I dropped heavily to the floor. There was a price to pay for this good fortune. The skin of my arms was already whitening; dark purple welts encircled them like rings in deadwood. Thank goodness I could not see my face bloating.

Not my face, not my life. The distinction was actually a trifle confusing—this body was already very comfortable; like an old boot. Dr. Chimera guessed the Yellow Ichor No. Five transfusion would not be sufficient for the task at hand. This was the Ancient Apothecary, after all! Brain transplants are not so risky as the Ichor infusion, believe it or don't. Hell, the government had been doing them with chimpanzees for decades. It wasn't like we were that valuable. Best part was, due to the Yellow Ichor I had a superior degree of control over my anatomical functions. Breathing, pulse, I could slow them to a crawl. Pain? There was only the pain I could not help but imagine. Everything else was subject to interpretation.

Luckily for me, despite popular opinion, the brain is the last thing to go. There was a chance I could still find the girl and get back to Central before the creeping ague reached my precious gray matter. It was sort of a shame. This body had belonged to an Olympic athlete in the prime of his life—a hammer thrower. I really wasn't enthused about looking down and seeing the old potbelly again. Of course, unless I did something to stop the insane machinations of the Ancient Apothecary it was a moot point. My superiors would be so displeased if I allowed him to succeed!

I found my clothes and my toys, and appropriated some of Mr. Spot's unorthodox medical tools. I got out of there.

Alaska is a vast frontier; the majority of that epic vastness is most charitably classified as wasteland. What better place to trifle with things Not Meant For the Eyes of Man? The Ancient Apothecary had chosen his lair fortuitously—an abandoned radar site near White Mountain, a tiny native village eighty miles southeast of Nome. Too bad for the world at large that the radar site had been a little more sinister than advertised; deep shafts scored the permafrost into a complex of bunkers and vaults where

certain, shall we say arcane, experiments were pursued during the Second World War. Things ended badly for the researchers; the site was boarded up and strung with now rust-twisted barbwire. Somebody important buried it in paperwork. Probably no one even knew about it any more—the frigid Alaskan tundra is liberally pocked with the skeletons of abandoned military stations.

Ah, but the Ancient Apothecary knew, and what he knew, we knew, or close enough. The people I work for were unhappy about this development in the travels of our old nemesis. So long as the Ancient Apothecary confined himself to Asia, we didn't mind. There is nothing happening worth mentioning in Asia these days. Then the unthinkable—he appeared in Western Europe last year, moving on to Cairo where certain artifacts went missing from the home of an extremely private collector. Next, Brazil, where he visited several unmapped temples; and in Brazil three of our agents followed him into the rain forest. The Ancient Apothecary emerged without them and continued on to North America; swallowed up by the Alaskan wilderness. Along about here occurred the mysterious disappearance of a world famous celebrity; couple that disappearance with an inauspicious alignment of constellations, and chaos tugged at the leash in H.Q. It seemed perfectly clear that something had to be done about the Ancient Apothecary. Central took off the gloves; they sent me in to rectify the situation.

Time was increasingly of the essence. For reasons unavoidable and too convoluted to suffer explanation, we had cut this operation close to the quick. Some might question why Central didn't just bomb the place, or at the very least send in a team to safely extinguish the threat. Ever try bombing an anthill? As for the latter, well, the sad truth was that if I couldn't slip in and terminate the Ancient Apothecary, more troops were academic.

Honestly, his operation was dreary. Everything was gray metal or smooth dark rock and dripping water. The lighting was bad; shadows pooled in wavery patterns. I moved along quickly, not overly worried about running afoul of guards. I had already killed the best ones and the Ancient Apothecary could scarcely support a private army after squandering his resources on arcana over the past few years. Nonetheless, I kept an eye

peeled; there were other things to worry about when you dealt with opposition like this. Lets just say I watched where I stepped and made sure shadows were shadows before I moved into them.

A prescient man would have disabled the elevator. Then again, a prescient man would not have risked his advantage to torture me at all. He would have put a bullet in the soft part of my brain, had a nice chuckle and gotten on with his nefarious schemes. Yet there the elevator was; rickety mesh and exposed gears and all that sort of thing. To accomplish what the Ancient Apothecary intended, he would need a deep dark cavern and the infinite seep of subterranean water. The elevator was ancient as my enemy. It clattered all the way down.

At the bottom there was a low chamber and a sturdy metal door. The door was locked and barred from the opposite side. Not a problem thanks to the white coats back at Central. Among the lethal appliances in my possession was a knife compartment oozing with a gelatinous compound and an electronic timing switch. I went into the elevator, crouched behind the frame and covered my ears.

A big hole materialized where the door had stood; the lights went dead in the room. Smoke formed acrid columns, not that it bothered me. Beyond the wreckage was a platform overlooking a narrow tunnel sloping down into utter blackness. I climbed down a ladder, touched on a penlight, and examined the rails. There weren’t any carts. Damn. I started walking; shambling, actually. My knee joints were stiff as dried leather; a distinct numbness emanated from both hands, forcing me to consciously squeeze the penlight. Oh, I truly hoped it wasn’t far.

I distracted myself by thinking about the victim in this affair. Call her Ms. Smyth. I wasn’t exaggerating when I referred to her as a celebrity. The Ancient Apothecary was up to big things; no ordinary woman would do. I had to hand it to him; Ms. Smyth was everything an insane cultist mastermind dreamed of in a ritual sacrifice. Her parents were some kind of genetic scientists; they grew her in a tube, and when she was a toddler they subjected her to a battery of tests—turns out the kid was a genius. They sent the genius to private schools—she graduated college with a double Ph.D. in astrophysics and theology by the tender age of seventeen. Still not good enough for the Ancient Apothecary. The girl decided to take up a sport, full

contact karate, no less. She tried out for the Olympic team, went to Melbourne, took the gold. Not good enough. She traveled around a bit, visited some mosques, gawked at the Pyramids and so forth. Then she wrote a paper speculating about the true nature of the universe. They decided to nominate her for a Nobel. While she was waiting to see how that turned out, just for amusement because one of her myriad close friends was an international recording artist, she took up the cello and discovered that playing it was about as difficult as holding her breath underwater. She became an overnight sensation and accepted a lucrative recording contract.

Good enough for the Ancient Apothecary? Not quite, not quite. Consider one final thing—Ms. Smyth was thirty-one years of age, brilliant, beautiful, and fabulously rich. Also, she was an avowed virgin.

Yes, she dated a handsome Olympic hammer thrower, but the flower of her womanhood would not be plucked save on the marriage bed. Now the Ancient Apothecary was happy.

I could only wish to be so pleased. This was like slogging in sand. A trick of the mind in perilous times; it seizes upon a pleasant juncture and capsizes there. I spilled with the recollection of a beach, an autumn beach, crescent curved and floating on the rim of God's Drinking Horn—red, gold, amber; the trees, the beach, the water. Lovers walked along the beach, not quite touching, there was no need, they already knew everything the press of flesh can spoil with its indelicacy. A tall, serious boy, pallid as chalk, though his eyes mirrored the changeable sea and were not unkind; and a girl of ivory and jet who smiled at things unspoken and looked at him often. A big dog trailed after; barrel chest dragging the sugar sand, foam-bearded upon his laughing snout. The girl hurled shells for the dog, some she kept for herself, and one she handed to the tall, serious boy. The boy took the shell and put it in his coat and the sky grew dark, darker, darkest. The boy and the girl disappeared into the drifting haze, then the dog, then they were gone.

That was long, long ago. The tall serious boy didn't exist anymore—if he ever had. Doors opened, he stepped through and discovered they wouldn't work from the other side. Some of those doors were peculiar; they removed him from the ordinary world. The girl was gone; something about a crash

with no survivors, all hands lost. What did lost mean? Did she think of him in those final moments? When was that? I don't know.

Where was that shell now? I don't remember. It was only a trick, a game that my mind played every now and then, a game to occupy my conscious in agonies past rather than agonies present.

After a while the penlight went dim and fizzled into extinction. I kept moving, groping with my arms, worried about the possibility of an unannounced shaft, or worse. I realized I could see my hands. God, they were getting hideous, floating before my eyes, glowing like noctilucent moths. Ahead there was a fuzzy light source. A dank odor came into my nose, plastered my hair into a mold. I was weaving drunkenly; my face felt too tight, pulling my mouth into an involuntary grin. Ha, ha. I focused on the gathering illumination and tried to stay in a proper line.

The tunnel let into a weird grotto; thick stalactites oozed above a broad shelf of polished rock; to the left of the rock was a lagoon. It was impossible to discern the scope of the lagoon as it extended into absolute pitch. Big, was my feeling.

Tall posts were arranged at either end of the rock shelf; these supported floodlights. A mess of coax and dangling wire; a generator whupped in the background, but I didn't see it for the glare. A mechanized rail cart awaited its busy occupants. Two men guarded the entrance, though how you are supposed to guard anything with your back turned is beyond me. I got my hands on them and dragged their bodies into the shadows before they could raise an alarm.

The Ancient Apothecary had started already. An altar was erected near the water's edge; obsidian plinths bracketed a raised bench of malachite and serpentine, the whole of it scriven with elaborate glyphs and runes. Blood grooves funneled down into the water. Ms. Smyth made a striking contrast draped naked and pale across the stone. So too the Ancient Apothecary swathed in crimson robes and wearing the unspeakable horned mask he had stolen from Brazil. His transformation was nothing short of diabolical. He chanted a dirge in his vile tongue; a piece of sharp metal flared in his hand when he gesticulated.

I was right on time.

It occurred to me that I resembled something out of a cut-rate horror show as I lurched into the light and came for him. Indeed, the Ancient Apothecary seemed completely surprised by my rematerialization. That didn't stop him from trying to stab me with his wicked dagger. Rigor encumbered or not, the Hammer Thrower's body had excellent reflexes. I caught the Ancient Apothecary's wrist and twisted hard. He dropped the knife and tried to form a symbol with his left hand. No real chance with that tactic, a sheen of sweat glimmered through the openings in his mask—rituals were grinding, thankless work! Besides, most pain signals were stalling out before they penetrated my dying flesh; I was maneuvering the hulk by memory.

The Ancient Apothecary was very strong. He twisted, he struggled, he gnashed his teeth and kicked at my shins. I switched off the circuits governing bodily safety tolerances, callous to my own tearing muscle and flexing tendons and bent the Ancient Apothecary into a horseshoe. He began to scream and his screams reverberated from the pitiless walls.

Those horrible cries were answered.

Distant at first, then rapidly drawing closer was an ominous splashing sound. Invisible to the eye, but not my prickling skin, a presence entered the lagoon. Sinuous coils of mist undulated across the water, mounted in stages, and caressed the altar. Bubbles foamed and frothed at the edge of the abruptly chattering lights. I sensed great displeasure aimed in my direction.

So I hurled the Ancient Apothecary into the chilly lagoon. A tremendous roiling commenced to stir the water; waves came at the shelf with some violence and splashed all around me. Ms. Smyth lent her own screams to the general cacophony.

"George!" She cried. "Oh my god! What is that?" Her eye bulged to regard something happening in the lagoon. I knew far better than to look.

"Come, my dear. Best that we depart at once." I grabbed her and bundled her into the trolley, pushed the lever until it refused to budge. The poor little cart was doubtless whisking along at top speed. It still felt like we were creeping into the tunnel.

Back in the cavern all the lights went out.

If the ride in the trolley was frightful, the elevator trip was like riding an updraft out of hell. Ms. Smyth clung to me sobbing as the lift jerked and jolted. The light bulb rattled in its dish and flickered crazily. Grinding noises started somewhere beneath our feet.

We made it to the bunker where all was quiet—for the moment at least. I found Ms. Smyth a jumpsuit and a parka and got her to put them on.

She babbled, gripped by an understandable level of hysteria. “Oh, George, what did they do to your face? Are you sick? What the hell is going on? Who is the Cyclops?”

“Really, dear, I’m in something of a hurry.” My tongue was cold and I had to speak slowly so she could understand. The floor vibrated now and again, heightening my anxiety. “Everything… is going to be fine. Please… on with your shoes, okay?”

“How did you find me, sweetheart? Look at your face! Stupid me, you can’t very well do that can you? Did that crazy awful man beat you? He was in my hotel room when I came back from the lecture. I was going to call you, but he was there with this other horrible man that looked like a crow and they grabbed me and put a rag over my mouth—”

“Put on your coat, honey.” The floor was trembling. Could a disembodied brain shriek with terror? Could you tell? It was an effort to lift my hands. My eyelids were not unlike cast iron shutters ready to drop. I cinched her hood and pushed her toward the stairs.

“—chloroform, I think. I woke up in a room with no windows, but I don’t know where I am. Where am I, George?”

“Safe now,” I said. We were on the stairs, climbing. I led the way, holding onto the handrail and yarding my dead weight forward one step at a time. I had a nightmare like that once—the kind where you run and run, but your legs won’t move and the monster is right there, right behind you—

Ms. Smyth snapped free of her unhinged state with remarkable alacrity. Prompted, no doubt, by her affection for this George fellow. She took my arm and pulled me along as best she could. The noises grew louder below and behind. I tried not to think about them. Better to ponder climbing these interminable stairs, to contemplate the mystical act of swinging one leg after the other, again, again, again—

We got away.

I imagine it was cold; October in Northern Alaska can't be described as anything else. Stars drilled bright holes in the sky. Dawn was a fingernail streak against the rim of the eastern horizon. To the west, downsloping drumlin hills merged with a bank of crystalline fog and the rough hide of the Bering Sea. The ground was patched with diamond-edged snow, tufts of grass, and rocks. I saw tracks; it seemed the friendly surgeons had escaped when they heard trouble. I wasn't worried—the tracks led off and suggested rapid steps.

I felt better in the open air; an illusion perhaps. It gave me the strength to steer her through a cluster of crumbling Quonset huts and jagged sections of tangled wire. Wind whistled through the spokes of the signal tower, sucked the breath from our mouths. We were out, yes. However, the radar site was too close for comfort and the sun was on its way and time was of the essence.

It wasn't far. I took her around the swell of a hill to the shelter of a jumble of shale and larger stones; a place where we could watch the sunrise. I sat her down in the lee of the rocks and moved to regard the heavens in their dispassionate glory. I tracked the constellations, as the Ancient Apothecary must have done. There, there, and there; oh, indeed the angles were unmistakable, yet the Ancient Apothecary had drawn the wrong conclusion from their spectral dance. I could no longer feel any part of my body, but I flushed with pleasure to witness feral Aldebaran shimmer in the lower firmament.

How could the Ancient Apothecary have been so careless? So deluded? Any fool could tell that it was not the Hour of the Cyclops. Rather it was the time of my master, He Who is Not to Be Named, to flow down from the crevices between the stars in icy space and lay claim to this wretched ball of dirt.

Who are you?" Ms. Smyth asked.

Slowly, I turned, extending my deathly smile in comfort and reassurance. "G—George… George." Speaking was all but impossible now.

Ms. Smyth was neither comforted nor reassured. Her eyes were very bright. Madness or hysteria or both. "I don't think so." She was casting about; a

wild animal scenting for unseen predators. It is possible she recognized the bare bones of my humble altar to the Slitherer of the Stars.

Maybe it was a lucky guess.

The Ancient Apothecary's god might have been satisfied with a single virgin offering. Not so, my master! For Him, nothing short of a double sacrifice was acceptable. I thought of the Hammer Thrower's brain—his virgin brain—nestled in its briny tank and my fellows in their gallant costumes, ritual knives at hand, awaiting the exact instant when the stars would fall right…

I pulled a curved and scalloped knife from the folds of my parka, held it pressed against my side as I staggered toward the cowering Ms. Smyth. "It's alright… dear. Let me… warm you…"

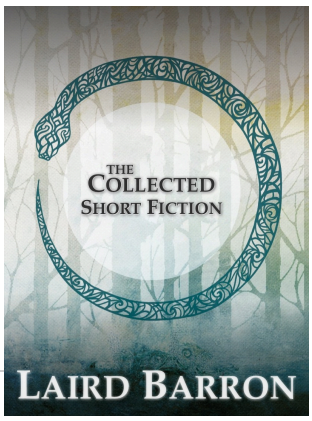
Ms. Smyth shot me I don't know how many times. Spurts of flame jumped from her coat pocket and into my chest. I think I heard the cracking report… or that might have been the ice floes rubbing together. Might have been my teeth clacking with rictus imperative. I really couldn't say how she got her hands on the weapon. When we fumbled on the stairs? Perhaps, perhaps…

No matter. She threw my revolver down, sobbing and cursing. There was no hesitation in her; she didn't waste a moment questioning this violence against the beloved form twisting at her feet.

I watched her run away down the hill and out of sight. I had to admit the girl was fast. Nothing I could do about it. Yellow Ichor No. Five was a miracle. Sadly, most of it was leaking into the snow. My arms were dead, my legs twitched and stilled. If a brain can scream, mine was surely doing that. Nobody was listening.

The sun bubbled up over the rim of the world. I couldn't even close my eyes to make it stop.

Shiva, Open Your Eye



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The human condition can be summed up in a drop of blood. Show me a *teaspoon* of blood and I will reveal to thee the ineffable nature of the cosmos, naked and squirming. Squirming. Funny how the truth always seems to do that when you shine a light on it.

A man came to my door one afternoon, back when I lived on a rambling farm in Eastern Washington. He was sniffing around, poking into things best left… unpoked. A man with a flashlight, you might say. Of course, I knew who he was and what he was doing there long before he arrived with his hat in one hand and phony story in the other.

Claimed he was a state property assessor, did the big genial man. Indeed, he was a massive fellow—thick, blunt fingers clutching corroborative documents and lumpy from all the abuse he had subjected them to in the military; he draped an ill-tailored tweed jacket and insufferable slacks over his ponderous frame. This had the effect of making him look like a man that should have been on a beach with a sun visor and a metal detector. The man wore a big smile under his griseous beard. This smile frightened people, which is exactly why he used it most of the time, and also, because it frightened people, he spoke slowly, in a big, heavy voice that sounded as if it emerged from a cast-iron barrel. He smelled of cologne and 3-IN-ONE Oil.

I could have whispered to him that the cologne came from a fancy emerald-colored bottle his wife had purchased for him as a birthday present; that he carried the bottle in his travel bag and spritzed himself whenever he was on the road and in too great a hurry, or simply too hungover for a shower. He preferred scotch, did my strapping visitor. I could have mentioned several other notable items in this patent-leather travel bag—a roll of electrical

tape, brass knuckles, voltmeter, police-issue handcuffs, a microrecorder, a pocket camera, disposable latex gloves, lockpicks, a carpet cutter, flashlight, an empty aspirin bottle, toothpaste, a half-roll of antacid tablets, hemorrhoid suppositories and a stained road map of Washington State. The bag was far away on the front seat of his rented sedan, which he had carefully parked up the winding dirt driveway under a sprawling locust tree. Wisely, he had decided to reconnoiter the area before knocking on the door. The oil smell emanated from a lubricated and expertly maintained thirty-eight-caliber revolver stowed in his left-hand jacket pocket. The pistol had not been fired in three-and-a-half years. The man did not normally carry a gun on the job, but in my case, he had opted for discretion. It occurred to him that I might be dangerous.

I could have told him all these things and that he was correct in his assumptions, but it did not amuse me to do so. Besides, despite his bulk he looked pretty fast and I was tired. Winter makes me lazy. It makes me torpid.

But—

Rap, rap! Against the peeling frame of the screen door. He did not strike the frame with anything approaching true force; nonetheless, he used a trifle more vigor than the occasion required. This was how he did things—whether conducting a sensitive inquiry, bracing a recalcitrant witness, or ordering the prawns at La Steakhouse. He was a water buffalo floundering into the middle of a situation, seizing command and dominating by virtue of his presence.

I made him wait longer than was necessary—to the same degree as his assault on my door was designed to set the tone and mood—although not *too* long, because sometimes my anticipatory juices outwrestle my subtler nature. I was an old man and thus tended to move in a deliberate mode anyway. This saddened me; I was afraid he might not catch my little joke.

But—

I came to the door, blinking in the strong light as I regarded him through filtering mesh. Of course, I permitted a suitable quaver to surface when I asked after his business. That was when the big man smiled and rumbled a string of lies about being the land assessor and a few sundries that I never

paid attention to, lost as I was in watching his mouth, his hands and the curious way his barrel chest lifted and fell under the crumpled suit.

He gave me a name, something unimaginative gleaned from a shoebox, or like so. The identity on his State of Washington Private Investigator's License read *Murphy Connell.* He had been an investigator for eleven years; self-employed, married with two children—a boy who played football at the University of Washington, and a girl that had transferred to Rhode Island to pursue a degree in graphic design—and owner of a Rottweiler named Heller. The identification was in his wallet, which filled an inner pocket of the bad coat, wedged in front of an ancient pack of Pall Malls. The big man had picked up the habit when he was stationed in the Philippines, but seldom smoked anymore. He kept them around because sure as a stud hound lifts its leg to piss, the minute he left home without a pack the craving would pounce on him hammer and tongs. He was not prone to self-analysis, this big man, yet it amused him after a wry sense that he had crushed an addiction only to be haunted by its vengeful ghost.

Yes, I remembered his call from earlier that morning. He was certainly welcome to ramble about the property and have a gander for Uncle Sam. I told him to come in and rest his feet while I fixed a pot of tea—unless he preferred a nip of the ole gin? No, tea would be lovely. *Lovely?* It delighted me in an arcane fashion that such a phrase would uproot from his tongue—sort of like a gravel truck dumping water lilies and butterflies. I boiled tea with these hands gnarled unto dead madroña, and I took my sweet time. Mr. Connell moved quietly, though that really didn't matter, *nothing* is hidden from these ears. I listened while he sifted through a few of the papers on the coffee table—*nothing of consequence there, my large one*—and efficiently riffled the books and *National Geographic*s on the sagging shelf that I had meant to fix for a while. His eyes were quick, albeit in a different sense than most people understand the word. They were quick in the sense that a straight line is quick, no waste, no second-guessing, thorough and methodical. Once scrutinized and done. Quick.

I returned in several minutes with the tea steeping in twin mugs. He had tossed the dim living room and was wondering how to distract me for a go at the upstairs—or the cellar. I knew better than to make it blatantly simple; he was the suspicious type, and if his wind got up too soon… Well, that

would diminish my chance to savor our time together. Christmas, this was Christmas, or rather, the approximation of that holiday, which fills children to the brim with stars and song. But Christmas is not truly the thing, is it now? That sublime void of giddy anticipation of the gaily colored packages contains the first, and dare I say, righteous spirit of Christmas. Shucking the presents of their skin is a separate pleasure altogether.

But—

Mr. Connell sat in the huge, stuffed lazy boy with springs poking him in the buttocks. It was the only chair in the room that I trusted to keep him off the floor and it cawed when he settled his bulk into its embrace. Let me say that our man was not an actor. Even after I sat him down and placed the mug in his fist, those accipitrine eyes darted and sliced from shadowed corner to mysterious nook, off-put by the cloying feel of the room—and why not? It was a touch creepy, what with the occasional creak of a timber, the low squeak of a settling foundation, the way everything was cast under a counterchange pattern of dark and light. I would have been nervous in his shoes; he was looking into murders most foul, after all. Pardon me, murder is a sensational word; television will be the ruin of my fleeting measure of proportion if the world keeps spinning a few more revolutions. *Disappearances* is what I should have said. Thirty of them. Thirty that good Mr. Connell knew of, at least. There were more, many more, but this is astray from the subject.

We looked at each other for a time. Me, smacking my lips over toothless gums and blowing on the tea—it was too damned hot, as usual! He, pretending to sip, but not really doing so on the off chance that I *was* the crazed maniac that he sought, and had poisoned it. A good idea, even though I had not done anything like that. Since he was pretending to accept my hospitality, I pretended to look at his forged documents, smacking and fumbling with some glasses that would have driven me blind if I wore them for any span of time, and muttered monosyllabic exclamations to indicate my confusion and ultimate verification of the presumed authenticity of his papers. One quick call to the Bureau of Land Management would have sent him fleeing as the charlatan I knew he was. I ignored the opportunity.

Mr. Connell was definitely not an actor. His small talk was clumsy, as if he couldn’t decide the proper way to crack me. I feigned a hearing impairment

and that was cruel, though amusing. Inside of ten minutes the mechanism of his logic had all save rejected the possibility of my involvement in those disappearances. No surprise there—he operated on intuition; *peripheral logic,* as his wife often called it. I failed the test of instinct. Half-blind, weak, pallid as a starfish grounded. Decrepit would not be completely unkind. I was failing him. Yet the room, the house, the brittle fold of plain beyond the window interrupted by a blot of ramshackle structure that was the barn, invoked his disquiet. It worried him, this trail of missing persons —vague pattern; they were hitchhikers, salesmen, several state troopers, missionaries, prostitutes, you name it. Both sexes, all ages and descriptions, with a single thread to bind them. They disappeared around my humble farm. The Federal Bureau of Investigation dropped by once, three years before the incident with Mr. Connell. I did not play with them. Winter had yet to make me torpid and weak. They left with nothing, suspecting nothing.

However, it was a close thing, that inconvenient visit. It convinced me the hour was nigh…

The tea grew cold. It was late in the year, so dying afternoon sunlight had a tendency to slant; trees were shorn of their glory, crooked branches casting crooked shadows. The breeze nipped and the fields were damp. I mentioned that he was going to ruin his shoes if he went tramping out there; he thanked me and said he'd be careful. I watched him stomp around, doing his terrible acting job, trying to convince me that he was checking the value of my property, or whatever the hell he said when I wasn't listening.

Speaking of shadows… I glanced at mine, spread out across the hood of the requisite '59 Chevrolet squatting between the barn and the house. Ah, a perfectly normal shadow, if a tad disfigured by the warp of light.

A majority of the things I might tell are secrets. Therefore, I shall not reveal them whole and glistening. Also, some things are kept from me, discomfiting as that particular truth may be. The vanished people; I know *what* occurred, but not *why.* To be brutally accurate, in several cases I cannot say that I *saw* what happened, however, my guesswork is as good as anyone's. There was a brief moment, back and back again in some murky prehistory of my refined consciousness, when I possessed the hubris to imagine a measure of self-determination in this progress through existence.

The Rough Beast slouching toward Bethlehem of its own accord. If leashed, then by its own device, certainly. Foolish me.

Scientists claim that there is a scheme to the vicious Tree of Life, one thing eats another and excretes the matter another being requires to sustain its spark so that it might be eaten by another which excretes the matter required to sustain the spark—And like so. Lightning does not strike with random intent, oceans do not heave, and toss-axes do not ring in the tulgy wood or bells in church towers by accident. As a famous man once said, there are no accidents ’round here.

Jerk the strings and watch us dance. I could say more on that subject; indeed, I might fill a pocket book with that pearl of wisdom, but later is better.

Mr. Connell slouched in from the field—picking about for graves, by chance?—resembling the Rough Beast I mentioned earlier. He was flushed; irritation and residual alcohol poisoning in equal parts. I asked him how he was doing, and he grunted a perfunctory comment.

Could he possibly take a closer look at the barn? It would affect the overall property value and like that… I smiled and shrugged and offered to show him the way. Watch your step, I warned him, it wouldn’t do for a government man to trip over some piece of equipment and end up suing the dirt from under my feet, ha, ha.

This made him nervous all over again and he sweated. Why? Two years before this visit, I could have said with accuracy. He would have been mine to read forward and back. By now, I was losing my strength. I was stuck in *his* boat, stranded with peripheral logic for sails. Mr. Connell sweated all the time, but this was different. Fear sweat is distinctive, any predator knows that. This pungent musk superseded the powerful cologne and stale odor of whiskey leaching from his pores.

To the barn. Cavernous. Gloom, dust, clathrose awnings of spent silk, scrabbling mice. Heavy textures of mold, of rust, decaying straw. I hobbled with the grace of a lame crow, yet Mr. Connell contrived to lag at my heel. Cold in the barn, thus his left hand delved into a pocket and lingered there. What was he thinking? Partially that I was too old, unless… unless an accomplice lurked in one of the places his methodical gaze was barred

from. He thought of the house; upstairs, or the cellar. *Wrong on both counts*. Maybe his research was faulty—what if I actually possessed a living relative? Now would be a hell of a time to discover *that* mistake! Mr. Connell thought as an animal does—a deer hardly requires proof from its stippled ears, its soft eyes or quivering nose to justify the uneasiness of one often hunted. Animals understand that life is death. This is not a conscious fact, rather a fact imprinted upon every colliding cell. Mr. Connell thought like an animal, unfortunately; he was trapped in the electrochemical web of cognition, wherein curiosity leads into temptation, temptation leads into fear, and fear is considered an impulse to be mastered. He came into the barn against the muffled imprecations of his lizard brain. Curiosity did not kill the cat all by itself.

His relentless eyes adjusted by rapid degrees, fastening upon a mass of sea-green tarpaulin gone velvet in the subterranean illume. This sequestered mass reared above the exposed gulf of loft, nearly brushing the venerable center-beam, unexpressive in its obscured context, though immense and bounded by that gravid force to founding dirt. Mr. Connell's heartbeat accelerated, spurred by a trickling dose of primordial dread. Being a laconic and linear man, he asked me what was under that great tarp.

I showed my gums, grasping a corner of that shroud with a knotted hand. One twitch to part the enigmatic curtain and reveal my portrait of divinity. A sculpture of the magnificent shape of God. Oh, admittedly it was a shallow rendering of That Which Cannot Be Named; but art is not relative to perfection in any tangible sense. It is our coarse antennae trembling blindly as it traces the form of Origin, tastes the ephemeral glue welding us, yearning after the secret of ineluctable evolution, and wonders what this transformation will mean. In my mind, here was the best kind of art—the kind hoarded by rich and jealous collectors in their locked galleries; hidden from the eyes of the heathen masses, waiting to be shared with the ripe few.

Came the rustle of polyurethane sloughing from the Face of Creation; a metaphor to frame the abrupt molting bloom of my deep insides. There, a shadow twisted on the floor; my shadow, but not me any more than a butterfly is the chrysalis whence it emerges. Yet, I wanted to see the end of this!

Mr. Connell gaped upon the construct born of that yearning for truth slithering at the root of my intellect. He teetered as if swaying on the brink of a chasm. He beheld shuddering lines that a fleshly tongue is witless to describe, except perhaps in spurts of impression—prolongated, splayed at angles, an obliquangular mass of smeared and clotted material, glaucous clay dredged from an old and abiding coomb where earthly veins dangle and fell waters drip as the sculpture dripped, milky-lucent starshine in the cryptic barn, an intumescent hulk rent from the floss of a carnival mirror. To gaze fully on this idol was to feel the gray matter quake inside its case and reject what the moist perceptions thought to feed it.

I cannot explain, nor must an artist defend his work or elucidate in such a way the reeling audience can fathom, brutes that they are. Besides, I was not feeling quite myself when I molded it from the morass of mindless imperative. Like a nocturnal flower, I *Become*, after that the scope of human perception is reduced and bound in fluids nameless and profane. There are memories, but their clarity is the clarity of a love for the womb, warmth, and lightless drift; fragmented happiness soon absorbed in the shuffle of the churning world and forgotten.

Mr. Connell did not comment directly; speech was impossible. He uttered an inarticulate sound, yarding at the lump of cold metal in his pocket—his crucifix against the looming presence of evil. Note that I refrain from scoffing at the existence of evil. The word is a simple name for a complex idea, an idea far outstripping the feeble equipment of sapient life. It is nothing to laugh at. As for my investigator, I like to remember him that way—frozen in a rictus of anguish at wisdom gained too late. Imagine that instant as the poor insect falls into the pitcher plant. He was an Ice-Age hunter trapped in the gelid bosom of a glacier. It was final for him.

I reached out to touch his craggy visage—

My perceptions flickered, shuttering so swiftly that I could not discern precise details of what occurred to big Mr. Connell. Suffice to say what was done to him was… incomprehensible. And horrible, I suppose most people would think. Not that I could agree with their value judgment. I suffered the throes of blossoming. It tends to affect my reasoning. The ordeal exhausted me; yet another sign.

Mr. Connell vanished like the others before him, but he was the last. After that, I left the farm and traveled north. Winter was on the world. Time for summer things to sleep.

I only mention this anecdote because it's the same thing every time, in one variation or another. Come the villagers with their pitchforks and torches, only to find the castle empty, the nemesis gone back to the shadowlands. Lumbered off to the great cocoon of slumber and regeneration.

In dreams I swim as I did back when the oceans were warm and empty. There I am, floating inside a vast membrane, innocent of coherent thought, guided by impulses to movement, sustenance and copulation. Those are dim memories; easy to assume them to be the fabrications of loneliness or delusion. Until you recall these are human frailties. Interesting that I always return to the soup of origins, whether in dreams or substance. Every piece of terrestrial life emerged from that steaming gulf. The elder organisms yet dwell in those depths, some hiding in the fields of microbes, mindless as jellyfish; others lumbering and feeding on what hapless forms they capture. Once, according to the dreams, I was one of those latter things. Except, I am uncertain if that was ever my true spawning ground.

In fairness, I do not ponder the circumstance of my being as much as logic would presume. My physiology is to thank, perhaps. There come interludes —a month, a year, centuries or more—and I simply *am*, untroubled by the questions of purpose. I seek my pleasures, I revel in their comforts. The ocean is just the ocean, a cigar is just a cigar. That is the state of *Becoming.*

Bliss is ephemeral; true for anyone, or anything. The oceans have been decimated several times in the last billion years. Sterile water in a clay bowl. Life returned unbidden on each occasion. The world slumbers, twitches and transforms. From the jelly, lizards crawled around the fetid swamps eating one another and dying, and being replaced by something else. Again, again, again, until you reach the inevitable conclusion of sky-rises, nuclear submarines, orbiting satellites, and Homo sapiens formicating the earth. God swipes His Hand across Creation, it changes shape and thrives. A cycle, indeed a cycle, and not a pleasant one if you are cursed with a brain and the wonder of what the cosmic gloaming shall hold for you.

Then there is me. Like the old song, the more things change, the more I stay the same.

When the oceans perished, I slept and later flopped on golden shores, glaring up at strange constellations, but my contemplation was a drowsy process and bore no fruit. When the lizards perished, I went into the sea and slept, and later wore the flesh and fur of warm-blooded creatures. When ice chilled and continents drifted together with dire results, I went into the sea and slept through the cataclysm. Later, I wore the skins of animals and struck flint to make fire and glared up at the stars and named them in a language I don't have the trick of anymore. Men built their idols, and I joined them in their squalid celebrations, lulled by flames and roasting flesh; for I was one with them, even if the thoughts stirring in my mind seemed peculiar, and hearkened to the sediment of dark forms long neglected. I stabbed animals with a spear and mated when the need was pressing. I hated my enemies and loved my friends and wore the values of the tribe without the impetus of subterfuge. I was a man. And for great periods that is all I was. At night I regarded the flickering lights in the sky and when I dreamed, it occurred to me exactly what the truth was. For a while I evaded the consequences of my nature. Time is longer than a person made from blood and tissue could hope to imagine. Ask God; distractions are important.

But—

Memories, memories. Long ago in a cave on the side of a famous mountain in the Old World. Most men lived in huts and cabins or stone fortresses. Only wise men chose to inhabit caves, and I went to visit one of them. A monk revered for his sagacity and especially for his knowledge of the gods in their myriad incarnations. I stayed with the wizened holy man for a cycle of the pocked and pitted moon. We drank bitter tea; we smoked psychedelic plants and read from crumbling tomes scriven with quaint drawings of deities and demons. It was disappointing—I could not be any of these things, yet there was little doubt he and I were different as a fish is from a stone. The monk was the first of them to notice. I did not concern myself. In those days my power was irresistible; let me but wave my hand and so mote it be. If I desired a thought from a passing mind, I plucked it fresh as sweet fruit from a budding branch. If I fancied a soothing rain, the firmament

would split and sunder. If I hungered, flesh would prostrate itself before me… unless I fancied a pursuit. Then it would bound and hide, or stand and bare teeth or rippling steel, or suffocate my patience with tears, oaths, pleas. But in the end, I had my flesh. That the monk guessed what I strove to submerge, as much from myself as the world at large, did not alarm me. It was the *questions* that pecked at my waking thoughts, crept into my slumberous phantasms. Annoying questions.

Stark recollection of a time predating the slow glide of aeons in the primeval brine. The images would alight unasked; I would glimpse the red truth of my condition. Purple dust and niveous spiral galaxy, a plain of hyaline rock broken by pyrgoidal clusters ringed in fire, temperatures sliding a groove betwixt boiling and freezing. The sweet huff of methane in my bellowing lungs, sunrise so blinding it would have seared the eyes from any living creature… and I knew there were memories layered behind and beyond, inaccessible to the human perception that I wore as a workman wears boots, gloves and warding mantle. To see these visions in their nakedness would boggle and baffle, or rive the sanity from my fragile intellect, surely as a hot breath douses a candle. Ah, but there were memories; a phantom chain endless as the coil of chemicals comprising the mortal genome, fused to the limits of calculation—

I try not to think too much. I try not to think too much about the buried things, anyhow. Better to consider the cycle that binds me in its thrall. For my deeds there is a season—spring, summer, autumn and winter. Each time I change it becomes clearer what precisely maintains its pattern. That I am a fragment of something much larger is obvious. The monk was the first to grasp it. There was a story he mentioned—how the priests prayed to their gods, good, and bad, to look upon men and bestow their munificent blessings. They even prayed to terrible Shiva the Destroyer, who slept in his celestial palace. They prayed because to slight Shiva in their supplication was to risk his not inconsiderable fury. Yet, the priests knew if Shiva opened his eye and gazed upon the world it would be destroyed.

But—

In the spring, I walk with the others of my kindred shell, nagged by fullness unsubstantiated.

In the summer, I see my shadow change, change and then I learn to blossom and suckle the pleasurable nectar from all I survey. Nail me to a cross, burn me in a fire. A legend will rise up from the ashes. Invent stories to frighten your children, sacrifice tender young virgins to placate my concupiscent urges. Revile me in your temples, call upon Almighty God to throw me down. No good, no good. How could He see you if not for me? How could He hear thy lament, or smell thy sadness? Or taste thee?

In the autumn, like a slow, heavy tide, purpose resurges, and I remember what the seasons portend. A wane of the power, a dwindling reserve of strength. Like a malign flower that flourishes in tropical heat, I wither before the advance of frost, and blacken and die, my seeds buried in the muck at the bottom of the ocean to survive the cruel winter.

I know what I am. I understand the purpose.

I left the farm and disappeared. One more name on the ominous list haunting law enforcement offices in seventeen states. I vanished myself to the Bering Coast—a simple feat for anyone who wants to try. An old man alone on a plane; no one cared. They never do.

There is an old native ghost town on a stretch of desolate beach. Quonset huts with windows shattered or boarded. Grains of snow slither in past open doors when the frigid wind gusts along, moaning through the abandoned FAA towers colored navy gray and rust. The federal government transplanted the villagers to new homes thirteen miles up the beach.

I don’t see anyone when I leave the shack I have appropriated and climb the cliffs to regard the sea. The sea being rumpled, a dark, scaly hide marred by plates of thickening ice. Individual islets today, a solid sheet in a few weeks, extending to the horizon. Or forever. I watch the stars as twilight slips down from the sky, a painless veil pricked with beads and sparks. Unfriendly stars. Eventually I return to the shack. It takes me a very long time—I am an old, old man. My shuffle and panting breath are not part of the theater. The shack waits and I light a kerosene lamp and huddle by the Bunsen burner to thaw these antiquitous bones. I do not hunger much this late in the autumn of my cycle, and nobody is misfortunate enough to happen by, so I eschew sustenance another day.

The radio is old too. Scratchy voice from a station in Nome recites the national news—I pay a lot of attention to this when my time draws nigh, looking for a sign, a symbol of tribulations to come—the United Nations is bombing some impoverished country into submission, war criminals from Bosnia are apprehended in Peru. A satellite orbiting Mars has gone offline, but NASA is quick to reassure the investors that all is routine, in Ethiopia famine is tilling people under by the thousands, an explosion caused a plane to crash into the Atlantic, labor unions are threatening a crippling strike, a bizarre computer virus is hamstringing two major corporations and so on and on. The news is never good, and I am not sure if there is anything I wanted to hear.

I close my rheumy eyes and see a tinsel and sequined probe driving out, out beyond the cold chunk of Pluto. A stone tossed into a bottomless pool, trailing bubbles. I see cabalists hunched over their ciphers, Catholics on their knees before the effigy of Christ, biologists with scalpels and microscopes, astronomers with their mighty lenses pointed at the sky, atheists, and philosophers with fingers pointed at themselves. Military men stroke the cool bulk of their latest killing weapon and feel a touch closer to peace. I see men caressing the crystal and wire and silicon of the machines that tell them what to believe about the laws of physics, the number to slay chaos in its den. I see housewives scrambling to pick the kids up from soccer practice, a child on the porch gazing up, and up, to regard the same piece of sky glimmering in my window. He wonders what is up there, he wonders if there is a monster under his bed. No monsters there, instead they lurk at school, at church, in his uncle’s squamous brain. Everyone is looking for the answer. They do not want to find the answer, trust me. Unfortunately, the answer will find them. Life—it’s like one of those unpleasant nature documentaries. To be the cameraman instead of the subjects, eh?

Ah, my skin warns me that it is almost the season. I dreamed for a while, but I do not recall the content. The radio is dead; faint drone from the ancient speaker. The kerosene wick has burned to cinders. A flash from the emerald-colored bottle catches my eye; full of cologne. I seldom indulge in cosmetics; the color attracted me and I brought it here. I am a creature of habit. When my affectations of evolution decay, habit remains steadfast.

Dark outside on the wintry beach. Sunrise is well off and may not come again. The frozen pebbles crackle beneath my heels as I stagger toward the canvas of obsidian water, leaving strange and unsteady tracks on the skeletal shore. There is a sense of urgency building. Mine, or the Other's? I strip my clothes as I go and end up on the cusp of the sea, naked and shriveled. The stars are feral. They shudder—a ripple is spreading across the heavens and the stars are dancing wildly in its pulsating wake. A refulgence that should not be seen begins to seep from the widening fissure. Here is a grand and terrible happening to write of on the wall of a cave… God opening His Eye to behold the world and all its little works.

I have seen this before. Let others marvel in my place, if they dare. My work is done, now to sleep. When I mount from the occluded depths what will I behold? What will be my clay and how shall I be given to mold it? I slip into the welcoming flank of the sea and allow the current to tug my shell out and down into the abyssal night. It isn't really as cold as I feared. Thoughts are fleeting as the bubbles and the light. The shell begins to flake, to peel, to crumble, and soon I will wriggle free of this fragile vessel.

But—

One final kernel of wisdom gained through the abomination of time and service. A pearl to leave gleaming upon this empty shore; safely assured that no one shall come by to retrieve it and puzzle over the contradiction. Men are afraid of the devil, but there is no devil, just me and I do as I am bid. It is God that should turn their bowels to soup. Whatever God is, He, or It, created us for amusement. It's too obvious. Just as He created the prehistoric sharks, the dinosaurs, and the humble mechanism that is a crocodile. And Venus fly traps, and black widow spiders, and human beings. Just as He created a world where every organism survives by rending a weaker organism. Where procreation is an imperative, a leech's anesthetic against agony and death and disease that accompany the sticky congress of mating. A sticky world, because God dwells in a dark and humid place. A world of appetite, for God is ever hungry.

I know, because I am His Mouth.

Old Virginia

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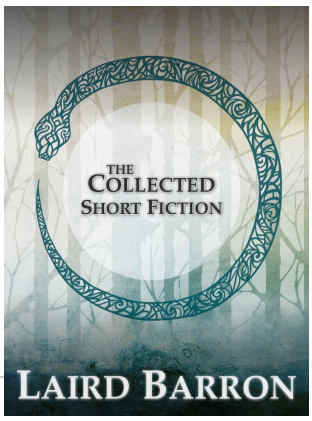

On the third morning I noticed that somebody had disabled the truck. All four tires were flattened and the engine was smashed. Nice work.

I had gone outside the cabin to catch the sunrise and piss on some bushes. It was cold; the air tasted like metal. Deep, dark forest at our backs with a few notches for stars. A rutted track wound across a marshy field into more wilderness. All was silent except for the muffled hum of the diesel generator behind the wood shed.

"Well, here we go," I said. I fired up a Lucky Strike and congratulated my pessimistic nature. The Reds had found our happy little retreat in the woods. Or possibly, one of my boys was a mole. That would put a pretty bow on things.

The men were already spooked—Davis swore he had heard chuckling and whispering behind the steel door after curfew. He also heard one of the doctors gibbering in a foreign tongue. Nonsense, of course. Nonetheless, the troops were edgy, and now this.

"Garland? You there?" Hatcher called from the porch in a low voice. He made a tall, thin silhouette.

"Over here." I waited for him to join me by the truck. Hatcher was my immediate subordinate and the only member of the detail I'd personally worked with. He was tough, competent and a decade my junior—which made him twice as old as the other men. If somebody here was a Red, I hoped to God it wasn't him.

"Guess we're hoofing it," he said after a quick survey of the damage.

I passed him a cigarette. We smoked in contemplative silence. Eventually I said, “Who took last watch?”

“Richards. He didn’t report any activity.”

“Yeah.” I stared into the forest and wondered if the enemy was lurking. What would be their next move, and how might I counter? A chill tightened the muscles in the small of my back, reminded me of how things had gone wrong during ’53 in the steamy hills of Cuba. It had been six years, and in this business a man didn’t necessarily improve with age. I said, “How did they find us, Hatch?”

“Strauss may have a leak.”

It went without saying whatever our military scientists were doing, the Reds would be doing bigger and better. Even so, intelligence regarding this program would carry a hefty price tag behind the Iron Curtain. Suddenly this little field trip didn’t seem like a babysitting detail anymore.

Project TALLHAT was a Company job, but black ops. Dr. Herman Strauss had picked the team in secret and briefed us at his own home. Now here we were in the wilds of West Virginia standing watch over two of his personal staff while they conducted unspecified research on a senile crone. Doctors Porter and Riley called the shots. There was to be no communication with the outside world until they had gathered sufficient data. Upon return to Langley, Strauss would handle the debriefing. Absolutely no one else inside the Company was to be involved.

This wasn’t my kind of operation, but I had seen the paperwork and recognized Strauss’ authority. Why me? I suspected it was because Strauss had known me since the first big war. He also knew I was past it, ready for pasture. Maybe this was his way to make me feel important one last time. Gazing at the ruined truck and all it portended, I started thinking maybe good old Herman had picked me because I was expendable.

I stubbed out my cigarette and made some quick decisions. “When it gets light, we sweep the area. You take Robey and Neil and arc south; I’ll go north with Dox and Richards. Davis will guard the cabin. We’ll establish a quarter mile perimeter; search for tracks.”

Hatcher nodded. He didn’t state the obvious flaw—what if Davis was playing for the other team? He gestured at the forest. “How about an

emergency extraction? We're twenty miles from the nearest traveled road. We could make it in a few hours. I saw some farms; one will have a phone —"

"Hatch, they destroyed the vehicle for a reason. Obviously they *want* us to walk. Who knows what nasty surprise is waiting down that road? For now we stay here, fortify. If worse comes to worst, we break and scatter. Maybe one of us will make it to HQ."

"How do we handle Porter and Riley?"

"This has become a security issue. Let's see what we find; then I'll break the news to the good doctors."

My involvement in Operation TALLHAT was innocent—if you can ever say that about Company business. I was lounging on an out-of-season New York beach when the telegram arrived. Strauss sent a car from Virginia. An itinerary; spending money. The works. I was intrigued; it had been several years since the last time I spoke with Herman.

Director Strauss said he needed my coolness under pressure, when we sat down to a four-star dinner at his legendary farmhouse in Langley. Said he needed an older man, a man with poise. Yeah, he poured it on all right.

Oh, the best had said it too—*Put his feet to the fire; he doesn't flinch. Garland, he's one cool sonofabitch.* Yes indeed, they had said it—thirty years ago. Before the horn rims got welded to my corrugated face and before the arthritis bent my fingers. Before my left ear went dead and my teeth fell out. Before the San Andreas Fault took root in my hands and gave them tremors. It was difficult to maintain deadly aloofness when I had to get up and drain my bladder every hour on the hour. Some war hero. Some Company legend.

"Look, Roger, I don't care about Cuba. It's ancient history, pal." Sitting across the table from Strauss at his farmhouse with a couple whiskey sours in my belly it had been too easy to believe my colossal blunders were forgiven. That the encroaching specter of age was an illusion fabricated by jealous detractors of which great men have plenty.

I had been a great man, once. Veteran of not one, but two World Wars. Decorated, lauded, feared. Strauss, earnest, blue-eyed Strauss, convinced

me some greatness lingered. He leaned close and said, *"Roger, have you ever heard of MK-ULTRA?"*

And I forgot about Cuba.

The men dressed in hunting jackets to ward the chill, loaded shotguns for possible unfriendly contact, and scouted the environs until noon. Fruitless; the only tracks belonged to deer and rabbits. Most of the leaves had fallen in carpets of red and brown. It drizzled. Black branches dripped. The birds had nothing to say.

I observed Dox and Richards. Dox lumbered in plodding engineer boots, broad Slavic face blankly concentrated on the task I had given him. He was built like a tractor; too simple to work for the Company except as an enforcer, much less be a Russian saboteur. I liked him. Richards was blond and smooth, an Ivy League talent with precisely enough cynicism and latent sadism to please the forward thinking elements who sought to reshape the Company in the wake of President Eisenhower's imminent departure. Richards, I didn't trust or like.

There was a major housecleaning in the works. Men of Richards' caliber were preparing to sweep fossils such as myself into the dustbin of history.

It was perfectly logical after a morbid fashion. The trouble had started at the top with good old Ike suffering a stroke. Public reassurances to the contrary, the commander in chief was reduced to a shell of his former power. Those closest saw the cracks in the foundation and moved to protect his already tottering image. Company loyalists closed ranks, covering up evidence of the president's diminished faculties, his strange preoccupation with drawing caricatures of Dick Nixon. They stood by at his public appearances, ready to swoop in if he did anything too embarrassing. Not a happy allocation of human resources in the view of the younger members of the intelligence community.

That kind of duty didn't appeal to the Richardses of the world. They preferred to cut their losses and get back to slicing throats and cracking codes. Tangible objectives that would further the dominance of U.S. intelligence.

We kept walking and not finding anything until the cabin dwindled to a blot. The place had been built at the turn of the century; Strauss bought it

for a song, I gathered. The isolation suited his nefarious plots. Clouds covered the treetops, yet I knew from the topographical maps there was a mountain not far off; a low, shaggy hump called Badger Hill. There would be collapsed mines and the moldered bones of abandoned camps, rusted hulks of machinery along the track, and dense woods. A world of brambles and deadfalls. No one came out this way anymore; hadn't in years.

We rendezvoused with Hatcher's party at the cabin. They hadn't discovered any clues either. Our clothes were soaked, our moods somber, although traces of excitement flickered among the young Turks—attack dogs sniffing for a fight.

None of them had been in a war. I'd checked. College instead of Korea for the lot. Even Dox had been spared by virtue of flat feet. They hadn't seen Soissons in 1915, Normandy in 1945, nor the jungles of Cuba in 1953. They hadn't seen the things I had seen. Their fear was the small kind, borne of uncertainty rather than dread. They stroked their shotguns and grinned with dumb innocence.

When the rest had been dispatched for posts around the cabin I broke for the latrine to empty my bowels. Close race. I sweated and trembled and required some minutes to compose myself. My knees were on fire, so I broke out a tin of analgesic balm and rubbed them, tasting the camphor on my tongue. I wiped beads of moisture from my glasses, swallowed a glycerin tablet and felt as near to one hundred percent as I would ever be.

Ten minutes later I summoned Doctor Porter for a conference on the back porch. It rained harder, shielding our words from Neil who stood post near an oak.

Porter was lizard-bald except for a copper circlet that trailed wires into his breast pocket. His white coat bore stains and smudges. His fingers were blue-tinged with chalk dust. He stank of antiseptic. We were not friends. He treated the detail as a collection of thugs best endured for the sake of his great scientific exploration.

I relayed the situation, which did not impress him much. "This is why Strauss wanted your services. Deal with the problem," he said.

"Yes, Doctor. I am in the process of doing that. However, I felt you might wish to know your research will become compromised if this activity

escalates. We may need to extract."

"Whatever you think best, Captain Garland." He smiled a dry smile. "You'll inform me when the moment arrives?"

"Certainly."

"Then I'll continue my work, if you're finished." The way he lingered on the last syllable left no doubt that I was.

I persisted, perhaps from spite. "Makes me curious about what you fellows are up to. How's the experiment progressing? Getting anywhere?"

"Captain Garland, you shouldn't be asking me these questions." Porter's humorless smile was more reptilian than ever.

"Probably not. Unfortunately since recon proved inconclusive I don't know who wrecked our transport or what they plan next. More information regarding the project would be helpful."

"Surely Doctor Strauss told you everything he deemed prudent."

"Times change."

"TALLHAT is classified. You're purely a security blanket. You possess no special clearance."

I sighed, and lighted a cigarette. "I know some things. MK-ULTRA is an umbrella term for the Company's mind control experiments. You psych boys are playing with all kinds of neat stuff—LSD, hypnosis, photokinetics. Hell, we talked about using this crap against Batista. Maybe we did."

"Indeed. Castro was amazingly effective, wasn't he?" Porter's eyes glittered. "So what's your problem, Captain?"

"The problem is the KGB has pretty much the same programs. And better ones from the scuttlebutt I pick up at Langley."

"Oh, you of all people should beware of rumors. Loose lips had *you* buried in Cuba with the rest of your operatives. Yet here you are."

I understood Porter's game. He hoped to gig me with the kind of talk most folks were polite enough to whisper behind my back, make me lose control. I wasn't biting. "The way I figure it, the Reds don't need TALLHAT… unless you're cooking up something special. Something they're afraid of. Something they're aware of, at least tangentially, but lack full intelligence.

And in that case, why pussyfoot around? They've got two convenient options—storm in and seize the data or wipe the place off the map."

Porter just kept smirking. "I am certain the Russians would kill to derail our project. However, don't you think it would be more efficacious for them to use subtlety? Implant a spy to gather pertinent details, steal documents. Kidnap a member of the research team and interrogate him; extort information from him with a scandal. Hiding in the woods and slicing tires seems a foolish waste of surprise."

I didn't like hearing him echo the bad thoughts I'd had while lingering in the outhouse. "Exactly, Doctor. The situation is even worse than I thought. We are being stalked by an unknown quantity."

"Stalked? How melodramatic. An isolated incident doesn't prove the hypothesis. Take more precautions if it makes you happy. And I'm confident you are quite happy; awfully boring to be a watchdog with nothing to bark at."

It was too much. That steely portion of my liver gained an edge, demanded satisfaction. I took off the gloves. "I want to see the woman."

"Whatever for?" Porter's complacent smirk vanished. His thin mouth drew down with suspicion.

"Because I do."

"Impossible!"

"Hardly. I command six heavily armed men. Any of them would be tickled to kick down the door and give me a tour of your facilities." It came out much harsher than I intended. My nerves were frayed and his superior demeanor had touched a darker kernel of my soul. "Doctor Porter, I read your file. That was my condition for accepting this assignment; Strauss agreed to give me dossiers on everyone. You and Riley slipped through the cracks after Caltech. I guess the school wasn't too pleased with some of your research or where you dug up the financing. Then that incident with the kids off campus. The ones who thought they were testing diet pills. You gave them, what was it? Oh yes—peyote! Pretty strange behavior for a pair of physicists, eh? It follows that Unorthodox Applications of Medicine and Technology would snap you up after the private sector turned its back. So excuse my paranoia."

“Ah, you do know a *few* things. But not the nature of TALLHAT? Odd.”

“We shall rectify that momentarily.”

Porter shrugged. “As you wish, Mr. Garland. I shall include your threats in my report.”

For some reason his acquiescence didn’t really satisfy me. True, I had turned on the charm that had earned me the title “Jolly Roger,” yet he had caved far too easily. Damn it!

Porter escorted me inside. Hatcher saw the look on my face and started to rise from his chair by the window. I shook my head and he sank, fixing Porter with a dangerous glare.

The lab was sealed off by a thick steel door, like the kind they use on trains. Spartan, each wall padded as if a rubber room in an asylum. It reeked of chemicals. The windows were blocked with black plastic. Illumination seeped from a phosphorescent bar on the table. Two cots. Shelves, cabinets, a couple boxy machines with needles and tickertape spools. Between these machines an easel with indecipherable scrawls done in ink. I recognized some as calculus symbols. To the left, a poster bed, and on the bed a thickly wrapped figure propped by pillows. A mummy.

Doctor Riley drifted in, obstructing my view—he was an aquamarine phantom, eyes and mouth pools of shadow. As with Porter, a copper circlet winked on his brow. “Afternoon, Captain Garland. Pull up a rock.” His accent was Midwestern nasal. He even wore cowboy boots under his grimy lab coat.

“Captain Garland wants to view the subject,” Porter said.

“Fair enough!” Riley seemed pleased. He rubbed his hands, a pair of disembodied starfish in the weirding glow. “Don’t fret, Porter. There’s no harm in satisfying the captain’s curiosity.” With that, the lanky man stepped aside.

Approaching the figure on the bed, I was overcome with an abrupt sensation of vertigo. My hackles bunched. The light played tricks upon my senses, lending a fishbowl distortion to the old woman’s sallow visage. They had secured her in a straitjacket; her head lolled drunkenly, dead eyes

frozen, tongue drooling from slack lips. She was shaved bald, white stubble of a Christmas goose.

My belly quaked. “Where did you find her?” I whispered, as if she might hear me.

“What’s the matter?” Doctor Riley asked.

“Where did you find her, goddamnit!”

The crone’s head swiveled on that too-long neck and her milky gaze fastened upon my voice. And she grinned, toothless. Horrible.

Hatcher kept some scotch in the pantry. Doctor Riley poured—I didn’t trust my own hands yet. He lighted cigarettes. We sat at the living room table, alone in the cabin, but for Porter and Subject X behind the metal door. Porter was so disgusted by my reaction he refused to speak with me. Hatcher had assembled the men in the yard; he was giving some sort of pep talk. Ever the soldier. I wished I’d had him in Cuba.

It rained and a stiff breeze rattled the eaves.

“Who is she to you?” Riley asked. His expression was shrewd.

I sucked my cigarette to the filter in a single drag, exhaled and gulped scotch. Held out my glass for another three fingers’ worth. “You’re too young to remember the first big war.”

“I was a baby.” Riley handed me another cigarette without being asked.

“Yeah? I was twenty-eight when the Germans marched into France. Graduated Rogers and Williams with full honors, was commissioned into the Army as an officer. They stuck me right into intelligence, sent me straight to the front.” I chuckled bitterly. “This happened before Uncle Sam decided to make an ‘official’ presence. Know what I did? I helped organize the resistance, translated messages French intelligence intercepted. Mostly I ran from the advance. Spent a lot of time hiding out on farms when I was lucky, field ditches when I wasn’t.

“There was this one family, I stayed with them for nine days in June. It rained, just like this. A large family—six adults, ten or eleven kids. I bunked in the wine cellar and it flooded. You’d see these huge bloody rats paddling if you clicked the torch. Long nine days.” If I closed my eyes I knew I

would be there again in the dark, among the chittering rats. Listening for armor on the muddy road, the tramp of boots.

"So, what happened?" Riley watched me. He probably guessed where this was headed.

"The family matriarch lived in a room with her son and daughter in-law. The old dame was blind and deaf; she'd lost her wits. They bandaged her hands so she couldn't scratch herself. She sucked broth out of this gnawed wooden bowl they kept just for her. Jesus Mary, I still hear her slobbering over that bowl. She used to lick her bowl and stare at me with those dead eyes."

"Subject X bears no relation to her, I assure you."

"I don't suppose she does. I looked at her more closely and saw I was mistaken. But for those few seconds… Riley, something's going on. Something much bigger than Strauss indicated. Level with me. What are you people searching for?"

"Captain, you realize my position. I've been sworn to silence. Strauss will cut off my balls if I talk to you about TALLHAT. Or we could all simply disappear."

"It's that important."

"It is." Riley's face became gentle. "I'm sorry. Doctor Strauss promised us ten days. One week from tomorrow we pack up our equipment and head back to civilization. Surely we can hold out."

The doctor reached across to refill my glass; I clamped his wrist. They said I was past it, but he couldn't break my grip. I said, "All right, boy. We'll play it your way for a while. If the shit gets any thicker though, I'm pulling the plug on this operation. You got me?"

He didn't say anything. Then he jerked free and disappeared behind the metal door. He returned with a plain brown folder, threw it on the table. His smile was almost triumphant. "Read these. It won't tell you everything. Still, it's plenty to chew on. Don't show Porter, okay?" He walked away without meeting my eye.

Dull wet afternoon wore into dirty evening. We got a pleasant fire going in the potbellied stove and dried our clothes. Roby had been a short order cook

in college, so he fried hamburgers for dinner. After, Hatcher and the boys started a poker game and listened to the radio. The weather forecast called for more of the same, if not worse.

Perfect conditions for an attack. I lay on my bunk reading Riley's file. I got a doozy of a migraine. Eventually I gave up and filled in my evening log entry. The gears were turning.

I wondered about those copper circlets the doctors wore. Fifty-plus years of active service and I'd never seen anything quite like them. They reminded me of rumors surrounding the German experiments in Auschwitz. Mengele had been fond of bizarre contraptions. Maybe we'd read his mail and adopted some ideas.

Who is Subject X? I wrote this in the margin of my log. I thought back on what scraps Strauss fed me. I hadn't asked enough questions, that was for damned sure. You didn't quiz a man like Strauss. He was one of the Grand Old Men of the Company. He got what he wanted, when he wanted it. He'd been everywhere, had something on everyone. When he snapped his fingers, things happened. People that crossed him became scarce.

Strauss was my last supporter. Of course I let him lead me by the nose. For me, the gold watch was a death certificate. Looking like a meatier brother of Herr Mengele, Strauss had confided the precise amount to hook me. *"Ten days in the country. I've set up shop at my cabin near Badger Hill. A couple of my best men are on to some promising research. Important research—"*

"Are we talking about psychotropics? I've seen what can happen. I won't be around that again."

"No, no. We've moved past that. This is different. They will be monitoring a subject for naturally occurring brain activity. Abnormal activity, yes, but not induced by us."

"These doctors of yours, they're just recording results?"

"Exactly."

"Why all the trouble, Herman? You've got the facilities right here. Why send us to a shack in the middle of Timbuktu?"

"Ike is on his way out the door. Best friend a covert ops man ever had, too. The Powers Soon to Be will put an end to MK-ULTRA. Christ, the office is

shredding documents around the clock. I've been given word to suspend all operations by the end of next month. Next month!"

"Nobody else knows about TALLHAT?"

"And nobody can—not unless we make a breakthrough. I wish I could come along, conduct the tests myself—"

"Not smart. People would talk if you dropped off the radar. What does this woman do that's so bloody important?"

"She's a remote viewer. A clairvoyant. She draws pictures, the researchers extrapolate."

"Whatever you're looking for—"

"It's momentous. So you see, Roger? I need you. I don't trust anyone else."

"Who is the subject?"

"Her name is Virginia."

I rolled over and regarded the metal door. She was in there, staring holes through steel.

"Hey, Cap! You want in? I'm getting my ass kicked over here!" Hatcher puffed on a Havana cigar and shook his head while Davis raked in another pot. There followed a chorus of crude imprecations for me to climb down and take my medicine.

I feigned good humor. "Not tonight, fellows. I didn't get my nap. You know how it is with us old folks."

They laughed. I shivered until sleep came. My dreams were bad.

I spent most of the fourth day perusing Riley's file. It made things about as clear as mud. All in all a cryptic collection of papers—just what I needed right then; more spooky erratum.

Numerous mimeographed letters and library documents comprised the file. The bulk of them were memos from Strauss to Porter. Additionally, some detailed medical examinations of Subject X. I didn't follow the jargon except to note that the terms "unclassified" and "of unknown origin" reappeared often. They made interesting copy, although they explained nothing to my layman's eyes.

Likewise the library papers seemed arcane. One such entry from *A Colonial History of Carolina and Her Settlements* went thusly:

> The Lost Roanoke Colony vanished from the Raleigh Township on Roanoke Island between 1588 and 1589. Governor White returned from England after considerable delays to find the town abandoned. Except for untended cookfires that burned down a couple houses, there was no evidence of struggle, though Spaniards and natives had subsequently plundered the settlement. No bodies or bones were discovered. The sole clue as to the colonists' fate lay in a strange sequence of letters carved into a palisade—Croatoan. The word CRO had been similarly carved into a nearby tree. White surmised this indicated a flight to the Croatoan Island, called Hatteras by natives. Hurricanes prevented a search until the next colonization attempt two years later. Subsequent investigation yielded no answers, although scholars suggest local tribes assimilated the English settlers. No physical evidence exists to support this theory. It remains a mystery of some magnitude…

Tons more like that. It begged the question of why Strauss, brilliant, cruel-minded Strauss, would waste a molecular biologist, a physicist, a bona fide psychic, and significant monetary resources on moldy folklore.

I hadn't a notion and this worried me mightily.

That night I dreamt of mayhem. First I was at the gray farmhouse in Soissons, eating dinner with a nervous family. My French was inadequate. Fortunately one of the women knew English and we were able to converse. A loud slurping began to drown out conversation about German spies. At the head of the table sat Virginia, sipping from a broken skull. She winked. A baby cried.

Then it was Cuba and the debacle of advising Castro's guerillas for an important raid. My intelligence network had failed to account for a piece of government armor. The guerillas were shelled to bits by Batista's garrison and young Castro barely escaped with his life. Five of my finest men were ground up in the general slaughter. Two were captured and tortured. They died without talking. Lucky for me.

I heard them screaming inside a small cabin in the forest, but I couldn't find the door. Someone had written CROATOAN on the wall.

I bumped into Hatcher, hanging upside down from a tree branch. He wore an *i like ike* button. "Help me, Cap," he said.

A baby squalled. Virginia sat in a rocking chair on the porch, soothing the infant. The crone's eyes were holes in dough. She drew a nail across her throat.

I sat up in bed, throttling a shriek. I hadn't uttered a cry since being shot in World War I. It was pitchy in the cabin. People were fumbling around in the dark.

Hatcher shined a flashlight my direction. "The generator's tits-up." Nearby, the doctors were already bitching and cursing their misfortune.

We never did find out if it was sabotaged or not.

The fifth day was uneventful.

On the sixth morning my unhappy world raveled.

Things were hopping right out of the gate. Doctor Riley joined Hatcher and me for breakfast. A powerful stench accompanied him. His expression was unbalanced, his angular face white and shiny. He grabbed a plate of cold pancakes, began wolfing them. Lanky hair fell into his eyes. He grunted like a pig.

Hatcher eased his own chair back. I spoke softly to Riley, "Hey now, Doc. Roby can whip up more. No rush."

Riley looked at me sidelong. He croaked, "She made us take them off."

I opened my mouth. His circlet was gone. A pale stripe of flesh. "Riley, what are you talking about?" Even as I spoke, Hatcher stood quietly, drew his pistol, and glided for the lab.

"Stupid old bastards." Riley gobbled pancakes, chunks dropping from his lips. He giggled until tears squirted, rubbed the dimple in his forehead. "Those were shields, Pops. They produced a frequency that kept her from… doing things to us." He stopped eating again, cast sharp glances around the room. "Where are your little soldiers?"

"On patrol."

“Ha, ha. Better call them back, Pops.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You’d just better.”

Hatcher returned, grim. “Porter has taken Subject X.”

I put on my glasses. I drew my revolver. “Doctor Riley, Mr. Hatcher is going to secure you. It’s for your own safety. I must warn you, give him any static and I’ll burn you down.”

“That’s right, Jolly Roger! You’re an ace at blowing people away! What’s the number up to, Captain? Since the first Big One? And we’re counting children, okay?” Riley barked like a lunatic coyote until Hatcher cracked him on the temple with the butt of his gun. The doctor flopped, twitching.

I uncapped my glycerin and ate two.

Hatcher was all business. He talked in his clipped manner while he handcuffed Riley to a center beam post. “Looks like he broke out through the window. No signs of struggle.”

“Documents?”

“Seems like everything’s intact. Porter’s clothes are on his cot. Found her straitjacket too.”

Porter left his clothes? I liked this less and less.

Rain splattered the dark windows. “Let’s gather everybody. Assemble a hunting party.” I foresaw a disaster; it would be difficult to follow tracks in the storm. Porter might have allies. Best-case scenario had him and the subject long gone, swooped up by welcoming Commie arms and out of my sorry life forever. Instinct whispered that I was whistling Dixie if I fell for that scenario. *Now you’re screwed, blued and tattooed, chum!* chortled my inner voice.

Hatcher grasped my shoulder. “Cap, you call it, we haul it. I can tell you, the boys are aching for a scrap. It won’t hurt anybody’s feelings to hunt the traitor to ground.”

“Agreed. We’ll split into two-man teams, comb the area. Take Porter alive if possible. I want to know who he’s playing for.”

“Sounds good. Someone has to cover the cabin.”

He meant I should be the one to stay back. They had to move fast. I was the old man, the weak link; I'd slow everybody down, maybe get a team member killed.

I mustered what grace I possessed. "I'll do it. Come on; we better get moving." We called the men together and laid it on the table. Everybody appeared shocked that Porter had been able to pull off such a brazen escape.

I drew a quick plan and sent them trotting into the wind-blasted dawn. Hatcher wasn't eager to leave me alone, but there weren't sufficient bodies to spare. He promised to report back inside of three hours one way or the other.

And they were gone.

I locked the doors, pulled the shutters, peeking through the slats as it lightened into morning.

Riley began laughing again. Deeper this time, from his skinny chest. The rank odor oozing from him would have gagged a goat. "How about a cigarette, Cap?" His mouth squirmed. His face had slipped from white to gray. He appeared to have been bled. The symptoms were routine.

"They'll find your comrade," I said. A cigarette sounded like a fine idea, so I lighted one for myself and smoked it. I kept an eye on him and one on the yard. "Yeah, they'll nail him sooner or later. And when they do…" I let it dangle.

"God, Cap! The news is true. You are so washed up! They say you were sharp back in the day. Strauss didn't even break a sweat, keeping you in the dark, did he? Think about it—why do you suppose I gave you the files, huh? Because it didn't matter one tin shit. He told me to give you anything you asked for. Said it would make things more interesting."

"Tell me the news, Riley."

"Can't you guess the joke? Our sweet Virginia ain't what she seems, no sir."

"What is she, then?"

"She's a weapon, Cap. A nasty, nasty weapon. Strauss is ready to bet the farm this little filly can win the Cold War for Team U.S.A. But first we had to test her, see." He banged his greasy head against the post and laughed

wildly. “Our hats were supposed to protect us from getting brain-buggered. Strauss went through hell—and a *heap* of volunteers—to configure them properly. They should’ve worked… I don’t know why they stopped functioning correctly. Bum luck. Doesn’t matter.”

“Where did Porter take her?”

“Porter didn’t take Virginia. She took him. She’ll be back for you.”

“Is Subject X really a clairvoyant?” My lips were dry. Too many blocks were clicking into place at once.

“She’s clairvoyant. She’s a lot of things. But Strauss tricked you—we aren’t here to test her ability to locate needles in haystacks. You’d die puking if you saw…”

“Is there anyone else? Does Porter have allies waiting?”

“Porter? Porter’s meat. It’s *her* you better worry about.”

“Fine. Does *she* have allies?

“No. She doesn’t need help.” Riley drifted. “Should’ve seen the faces on those poor people. Strauss keeps some photographs in a safe. Big stack. Big. It took so long to get the hats right. He hired some hardcases to clean up the mess. Jesus, Cap. I never would’ve believed there were worse characters than you.”

“Strauss is careful,” I said. “It must have taken years.”

“About fifteen or so. Even the hardcases could only deal with so many corpses. And the farm; well, it’s rather high profile. These three Company guys handled disposals. Three that I met, anyway. These fellows started getting nervous, started acting hinky. Strauss made her get rid of them. This was no piece of cake. Those sonofabitches wanted to live, let me tell you.” He grew quiet and swallowed. “She managed, but it was awful, and Strauss decided she required field testing. She required more ‘live’ targets, is how he put it. Porter and me knew he meant Company men. Black ops guys nobody would miss. Men who were trained like the Reds and the Jerries are trained. Real killers.”

“Men like me and my team,” I said.

“Gold star!” He cackled, drumming the heels of his Stetsons against the planks. His hilarity coarsened into shrieks. Muscles stood in knots on his

arms and neck. “Oh God! She rode us all night—oh Christ!” He became unintelligible. The post creaked with the strain of his thrashing.

I found the experience completely unnerving. Better to stare through the watery pane where trees took shape as light fell upon their shoulders. My bladder hurt; too fearful to step outside, I found a coffee can and relieved myself. My hands shook and I spilled a bit.

The man’s spasms peaked and he calmed by degrees. I waited until he seemed lucid, said, “Let me help you, Riley. Tell me what Porter—what she—did. Are you poisoned?” There was a bad thought. Say Porter had slipped a touch of the pox into our water supply… I ceased that line of conjecture. Pronto.

“She rode us, Cap. Aren’t you listening to ME?” He screeched the last, frothing. “I want to die now.” His chin drooped and he mumbled incoherently.

I let him be. *How now, brown cow?* I had been so content sitting on that Coney Island beach watching seagulls rip at detritus and waiting for time to expire.

The whole situation had taken on an element of black comedy. Betrayed by that devil Strauss? Sure, he was Machiavelli with a hard-on. I’d seen him put the screws to better men than me. I’d helped him do the deed. Yeah, I was a rube, no doubt. Problem was, I still had not the first idea what had been done to us exactly. Riley was terrified of Virginia. Fair enough, she scared me too. I believed him when he said she could do things—she was possibly a savant, like the idiot math geniuses we locked in labs and sweated atom-smashing secrets from. The way her face had changed when I first saw her convinced me of this.

She’s a weapon, a nasty, nasty weapon. I didn’t know what that meant. I didn’t care much, either. Something bad had happened to Riley. Whether Virginia had done it, whether Porter had done it, or if the goddamned KGB was cooking his brain with EM pulses, we were in the soup. How to escape the pot was my new priority.

I settled in with my shotgun to wait. And plan.

Nobody returned from the morning expedition.

Around 1700 hours I decided that I was screwed. The operation was compromised, its principal subject missing. The detail assigned to guard the principal was also missing and likely dead or captured.

What to do? I did what we intelligence professionals always did at moments like this. I started a fire in the stove and began burning documents. In forty-five minutes all paper records of Operation TALLHAT were coals. This included my personal log. Doctor Riley observed this without comment. He lapsed into semiconsciousness before I finished.

Unfortunately I decided to check him for wounds.

Don't know what possessed me. I was sort of like a kid poking a dead animal with a stick. I was *compelled*. Cautiously I lifted his shirt and found three holes in his back—one in the nape of his neck, two at the base of his spine. Each was the diameter of a walnut and oozed dark blood. They stank of rotten flesh, of gangrene.

She rode us all night, Cap!

Thank God for decades of military discipline—the machinery took over. If a soldier could regard the charred corpses of infant flame-thrower victims and maintain his sanity, a soldier could stomach a few lousy holes in a man's spine. I detached myself from this gruesome spectacle and the realization that this was the single most monumental balls-up of my career. What a way to go out!

I determined to make a break for the main road. A twenty-mile hike; more, since I dared not use the main track, but certainly within my range. At that point, I was certain I could sprint the distance if necessary. Yeah, best idea I'd had so far.

"Cap, help me." Hatcher's voice muffled by rain against the roof.

I limped to the window. The light had deteriorated. I made him out, standing a few yards away between some trees. His arms were spread as if in greeting—then I saw the rope.

"Cap! Help me!" His face was alabaster, glowing in the dusk.

I began a shout, but was interrupted by an ominous thump of displaced weight behind me. My heart sank.

"Yes, Cap. Help him," Virginia crooned.

I turned and beheld her. Her naked skull scraped the ceiling. A wizened child, grinning and drooling. She towered because she sat upon Dox's broad back, her yellow nails digging at his ears. His expression was flaccid as he bore down on me.

The shotgun jumped in my hands and made its terrible racket. Then Dox's fingers closed over my throat and night fell.

I did not dream of Cuba or the failed attack on Batista's garrison. Nor did I dream of walking through the black winter of Dresden surrounded by swirling flakes of ash. I didn't dream of Soissons with its muddy ditches and rats.

I dreamt of people marching single file across a field. Some dressed quaintly, others had forgotten their shoes. Many had forgotten to dress at all. Their faces were blank as snow. They stumbled. At least a hundred men, women and children. Marching without speaking. A great hole opened in the ground before them. It stank of carrion. One by one the people came to this hole, swayed, and toppled into the cavity. Nobody screamed.

I woke to see the cabin wall flickering in lamplight. Blurry, for my glasses were lost. Something was wrong with my legs; they were paralyzed. I suspected my back was broken. At least there was no pain.

The numbness seemed to encompass my senses as well—the fear was still present, but submerged and muzzled. Glacial calm stole over me.

"Doctor Riley was misled. Herman never intended this solely as a test." Virginia's voice quavered from somewhere close behind my shoulder.

Her shadow loomed on the wall. A wobbly silhouette that flowed unwholesomely. Floorboards squeaked as she shifted. The thought of rolling over brought sweat to my cheeks, so I lay there and watched her shadow in morbid fascination.

"It was also an offering. Mother is pleased. He will be rewarded with a pretty."

"My men," I said. It was difficult to talk, my throat was rusty and bruised.

"With Mother. Except the brute. You killed him. Mother won't take meat unless it's alive. Shame on you, Roger." She chuckled evilly. The sound withdrew slightly, and her shadow shrank. "Oh, your back isn't broken.

You'll feel your legs presently. I didn't want you running off before we had a chance to talk."

I envisioned a line of men, Hatcher in the lead, marching through the woods and up a mountain. It rained heavily and they staggered in the mud. No one said anything. Automatons winding down. Ahead yawned a gap in a rocky slope. A dank cave mouth. One by one they went swallowed…

There came a new sound that disrupted my unpleasant daydream—sobbing. It was Riley; smothered as by a gag. I could tell from its frantic nature that Virginia crouched near him. She said to me, "I came back for you, Roger. As for this one, I thought he had provided to his limit… yet he squirms with vigor. Ah, the resilience of life!"

"Who are you?" I asked as several portions of her shadow elongated from the central axis, dipped as questing tendrils. Then, a dim, wet susurration. I thought of pitcher plants grown monstrous and shut my eyes tight.

Riley's noises became shrill.

"Don't be afraid, Roger." Virginia rasped, a bit short of breath. "Mother wants to meet you. Such a vital existence you have pursued! Not often does She entertain provender as seasoned as yourself. If you're lucky, the others will have sated Her. She will birth you as a new man. A man in Her image. You'll get old, yes. Being old is a wonderful thing, though. The older you become, the more things you taste. The more you taste, the more pleasure you experience. There is *so much* pleasure to be had."

"Bullshit! If it were such a keen deal, Herman would be cashing in! Not me!"

"Well, Herman is overly cautious. He has reservations about the process. I'll go back and work on him some more."

"Who are you? Who is your mother?" I said it too loudly, hoping to obscure the commotion Riley was making. The squelching. I babbled, "How did Strauss find you? Jesus!"

"You read the files—I asked the doctors. If you read the files you know where I was born and who I am. You know who Mother is—a colonist wrote Her name on the palisade, didn't he? A name given by white explorers to certain natives who worshipped Her. Idiots! The English are

possibly the stupidest people that ever lived." She tittered. "I was the first Christian birth in the New World. I was special. The rest were meat. Poor mama, poor daddy. Poor everyone else. Mother is quite simple, actually. She has basic needs… She birthed me anew, made me better than crude flesh and now I help Her conduct the grand old game. She sent me to find Herman. Herman helps Her. I think you could help Her too."

"Where is your mother? Is she here?"

"Near. She moves around. We lived on the water for a while. The mountain is nicer, the shafts go so deep. She hates the light. All of Her kind are like that. The miners used to come and She talked with them. No more miners."

I wanted to say something, anything to block Riley's clotted screams. Shortly, his noises ceased. Tears seeped from my clenched eyelids. "D-did the copper circlets ever really work? Or was that part of the joke?" I didn't care about the answer.

Virginia was delighted. "Excellent! Well, they did. That's why I arranged to meet Strauss, to attach myself. He is a clever one! His little devices worked to interfere until we got here, so close to Mother's influence. I am merely a conduit of Her majestic power. She is unimaginable!"

"You mentioned a game…"

Virginia said, "Do you suppose men invented chess? I promise you, there are contests far livelier. I have been to the universities of the world, watching. You have visited the battlefields of the world, watching. Don't you think the time is coming?"

"For what?"

"When mankind will manage to blacken the sky with bombs and cool the earth so that Mother and Her brothers, Her sisters and children may emerge once more! Is there any other purpose? Oh, what splendid revelries there shall be on that day!"

What could I answer with?

Virginia didn't mind. She said, "The dinosaurs couldn't do it in a hundred million years. Nor the sharks in their oceans given three times that. The monkeys showed promise, but never realized their potential. Humans are the best pawns so far—the ones with a passion for fire and mystery. With

subtle guidance they—you—can return this world to the paradise it was when the ice was thick and the sun dim. We need men like Adolph, and Herman, and their sweet sensibilities. Men who would bring the winter darkness so they might caper around bonfires. Men like you, dear Roger. Men like you." Virginia ended on a cackle.

Hiroshima bloomed upon my mind's canvas and I nearly cried aloud. And Auschwitz, and Verdun, and all the rest. Yes, the day was coming. "You've got the wrong man," I said in my bravest tone. "You don't know the first thing. I'm a bloody patriot."

"Mother appreciates that, dear Roger. Be good and don't move. I'll return in a moment. Must fetch you a coat. It's raining." Virginia's shadow slipped into the lab. There followed the clatter of upturned objects and breaking glass.

Her brothers, Her sisters and children. Pawns. Provender. My gorge tasted bitter. Herman helping creatures such as this bring about hell on Earth. For what? Power? The promise of immortality? Virginia's blasphemous longevity should've cured him of that desire.

Oh, Herman, you fool! On its heels arrived the notion that perhaps I would change my mind after a conversation with Mother. That one day soon I might sit across the table from Strauss and break bread in celebration of a new dawn.

I wept as I pulled my buck knife free, snicked the catch. Would that I possessed the courage to slit my own wrists! I attempted to do just that, but lacked the conviction to carry through. Seventy years of self-aggrandizement had robbed me of any will to self-destruction.

So, I began to carve a message into the planks instead. A warning. Although what could one say about events this bizarre? This hideous? I shook with crazed laughter and nearly broke the blade with my furious hacking.

I got as far as CRO before Virginia came and rode me into the woods to meet her mother.

Bulldozer

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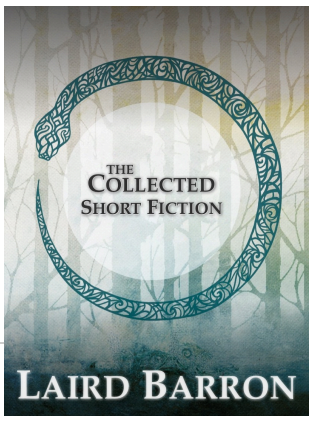

1

—Then He bites off my shooting hand.

Christ on a pony, here's a new dimension of pain.

The universe flares white. A storm of dandelion seeds, a cyclone of fire. That's the Coliseum on its feet, a full-blown German orchestra, a cannon blast inside my skull, the top of my skull coming off.

I better suck it up or I'm done for.

I'm a Pinkerton man. That means something. I've got the gun, a cold blue Colt and a card with my name engraved beneath the unblinking eye. I'm the genuine article. I'm a dead shot, a deadeye Dick. I was on the mark in Baltimore when assassins went for Honest Abe. I skinned my iron and plugged them varmints. Abe should've treated me to the theater. Might still be here. Might be in a rocker scribbling how the South was won.

Can't squeeze no trigger now can I? I can squirt my initials on the ceiling.

I'm a Pinkerton I'm a Pinkerton a goddamned Pinkerton.

That's right you sorry sonofabitch you chew on that you swallow like a python and I'll keep on chanting it while I paint these walls.

Belphegor ain't my FatherMother Father thou art in Heaven Jesus loves me.

Jesus Christ.

My balls clank when I walk.

I'm walking to the window.

Well I'm crawling.

If I make it to the window I'll smash the glass and do a stiff drop.

I've got to hustle the shades are dropping from left to right.

Earth on its axis tilting to the black black black iris rolling back inside a socket.

I'm glad the girl hopped the last train. Hope she's in Frisco selling it for more money than she's ever seen here in the sticks.

I taste hard Irish whiskey sweet inside her navel. She's whip smart she's got gams to run she's got blue eyes like the barrel of the gun on the floor under the dresser I can't believe how much blood can spurt from a stump I can't believe it's come to this I hear Him coming heavy on the floorboards buckling He's had a bite He wants more meat.

Pick up the iron southpaw Pinkerton pick it up and point like a man with grit in his liver not a drunk seeing double.

Hallelujah.

Who's laughing now you slack-jawed motherfucker I told you I'm a dead shot now you know now that it's too late.

Let me just say kapow-kapow.

I rest my case, ladies and gennulmen of the jury. I'm

2

"A Pinkerton man. Well, shit my drawers." The engineer, a greasy brute in striped coveralls, gave me the once-over. Then he spat a stream of chaw and bent his back to feeding the furnace. Never heard of my man Rueben Hicks, so he said. He didn't utter another word until the narrow gauge spur rolled up to the wretched outskirts of Purdon.

Ugly as rot in a molar, here we were after miles of pasture and hill stitched with barbwire.

Rude frame boxes squatted in the stinking alkaline mud beside the river. Rain pounded like God's own darning needles, stood in orange puddles along the banks, pooled in ruts beneath the awnings. Dull lamplight warmed coke-rimed windows. Shadows fluttered, moths against glass. Already,

above the hiss and drum of the rain came faint screams, shouts, piano music.

Just another wild and wooly California mining town that sprang from the ground fast and would fall to ruin faster when the gold played out. Three decades was as the day of a mayfly in the scope of the great dim geography of an ancient continent freshly opened to white men.

Industry crowded in on the main street: Bank. Hotel. Whorehouse. Feed & Tack. Dry Goods. Sawbones. Sheriff's Office. A whole bunch of barrelhouses. Light of the Lord Baptist Temple up the lane and yonder. Purdon Cemetery. A-frame houses, cottages, shanties galore. Lanky men in flannels. Scrawny sows with litters of squalling brats. A rat warren.

The bruised mist held back a wilderness of pines and crooked hills. End of the world for all intents and purposes.

I stood on the leaking platform and decided this was a raw deal. I didn't care if the circus strongman was behind one of the piss-burned saloon façades, swilling whiskey, feeling up the thigh of a horse-toothed showgirl. I'd temporarily lost my hard-on for his scalp with the first rancid-sweet whiff of gunsmoke and open sewage. Suddenly, I'd had a bellyful.

Nothing for it but to do it. I slung my rifle, picked up my bags and began the slog.

3

I signed *Jonah Koenig* on the ledger at the Riverfront Hotel, a rambling colonial monolith with oil paintings of Andrew Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant and the newly anointed Grover Cleveland hanging large as doom in the lobby. This wasn't the first time I'd used my real name on a job since the affair in Schuylkill, just the first time it felt natural. A sense of finality had settled into my bones.

Hicks surely knew I was closing in. Frankly, I didn't much care after eleven months of eating coal dust from Boston to San Francisco. I cared about securing a whiskey, a bath and a lay. Not in any particular order.

The clerk, a veteran of the trade, understood perfectly. He set me up on the third floor in a room with a liquor cabinet, a poster bed and a view of the

mountains. The presidential suite. Some kid drew a washtub of lukewarm water and took my travel clothes to get cleaned. Shortly, a winsome, blue-eyed girl in a low-cut dress arrived without knocking. She unlocked a bottle of bourbon, two glasses and offered to scrub my back.

She told me to call her Violet and didn't seem fazed that I was buck-naked or that I'd almost blown her head off. I grinned and hung gun and belt on the back of a chair. Tomorrow was more than soon enough to brace the sheriff.

Violet sidled over, got a handle on the situation without preamble. She had enough sense not to mention the brand on my left shoulder, the old needle tracks or the field of puckered scars uncoiling on my back.

We got so busy I completely forgot to ask if she'd ever happened to screw a dear chum of mine as went by Rueben Hicks. Or Tom Mullen, or Ezra Slade. Later I was half-seas over and when I awoke, she was gone.

I noticed a crack in the plaster. A bleeding fault line.

4

"Business or pleasure, Mr. Koenig?" Sheriff Murtaugh was a stout Irishman of my generation who'd lost most of his brogue and all of his hair. His right leg was propped on the filthy desk, foot encased in bandages gone the shade of rotten fruit. It reeked of gangrene. "Chink stabbed it with a pickaxe, can y'beat that? Be gone to hell before I let Doc Campion have a peek—he'll want to chop the fucker at the ankle." He'd laughed, polishing his tarnished lawman's star with his sleeve. Supposedly there was a camp full of Chinese nearby; the ones who'd stayed on and fallen into mining after the railroad pushed west. Bad sorts, according to the sheriff and his perforated foot.

We sat in his cramped office, sharing evil coffee from a pot that had probably been bubbling on the stove for several days. At the end of the room was the lockup, dingy as a Roman catacomb and vacant but for a deputy named Levi sleeping off a bender in an open cell.

I showed Murtaugh a creased photograph of Hicks taken during a P.T. Barnum extravaganza in Philadelphia. Hicks was lifting a grand piano on

his back while ladies in tights applauded before a pyramid of elephants. “Recognize this fellow? I got a lead off a wanted poster in Frisco. Miner thought he’d seen him in town. Wasn’t positive.” The miner was a nice break—the trail was nearly three months cold and I’d combed every two-bit backwater within six hundred miles before the man and I bumped into each other at the Gold Digger Saloon and started swapping tales.

“Who wants to know?”

“The Man himself.”

“Barnum? Really?”

“Oh, yes indeed.” I began rolling a cigarette.

Murtaugh whistled through mismatched teeth. “Holy shit, that’s Iron Man Hicks. Yuh, I seen him around. Came in ’bout June. Calls hisself Mullen, says he’s from Philly. Gotta admit he looks different from his pictures. Don’t stack up to much in person. So what’s he done to bring a Pinkerton to the ass-end o’ the mule?”

I struck a match on the desk, took a few moments to get the cigarette smoldering nicely. There was a trace of hash mixed with the tobacco. Ah, that was better. “Year and half back, some murders along the East Coast were connected to the presence of the circus. Ritual slayings—pentagrams, black candles, possible cannibalism. Nasty stuff. The investigation pointed to the strongman. Cops hauled him in, nothing stuck. Barnum doesn’t take chances; fires the old boy and has him committed. Cedar Grove may not be pleasant, but it beats getting lynched, right? Iron Man didn’t think so. He repaid his boss by ripping off some trinkets Barnum collected and skipping town.”

“Real important cultural artifacts, I bet,” Murtaugh said.

“Each to his own. Most of the junk turned up with local pawn dealers, antiquarians’ shelves, spooky shops and you get the idea. We recovered everything except the original translation of the *Dictionnaire Infernal* by a dead Frenchman, Collin de Plancy.”

“What’s that?”

“A book about demons and devils. Something to talk about at church.”

“The hell y’say. Lord have mercy. Well, I ain’t seen Mullen, uh, Hicks, in weeks, though y’might want to check with the Honeybee Ranch. And Trosper over to the Longrifle. Be advised—Trosper hates lawmen. Did a stretch in the pokey, I reckon. *We* got us an understandin’, o’ course.”

“Good thing I’m not really a lawman, isn’t it?”

“What’s the guy’s story?” Murtaugh stared at the photo, shifting it in his blunt hands.

I said, “Hicks was born in Plymouth. His father was a minister, did missionary work here in California—tried to save the Gold Rush crowd. Guess the minister beat him something fierce. Kid runs off and joins the circus. Turns out he’s a freak of nature and a natural showman. P.T. squires him to every city in the Union. One day, Iron Man Hicks decides to start cutting the throats of rag pickers and whores. At least, that’s my theory. According to the docs at Cedar Grove, there’s medical problems—might be consumption or syph or something completely foreign. Because of this disease maybe he hears voices, wants to be America’s Jack the Ripper. Thinks God has a plan for him. Who knows for sure? He’s got a stash of dubious bedside material on the order of the crap he stole from Barnum, which was confiscated; he’d filled the margins with notes the agency eggs still haven’t deciphered. Somebody introduced him to the lovely hobby of demonology—probably his own dear dad. I can’t check that because Hicks senior died in ’67 and all his possessions were auctioned. Anyway, Junior gets slapped into a cozy asylum with the help of Barnum’s legal team. Hicks escapes and, well, I’ve told you the rest.”

“Jesus H., what a charmin’ tale.”

We drank our coffee, listened to rain thud on tin. Eventually Murtaugh got around to what had probably been ticking in his brain the minute he recognized my name. “You’re the fellow who did for the Molly Maguires.”

“Afraid so.”

He smirked. “Yeah, I thought it was you. Dirty business that, eh?”

“Nothing pretty about it, Sheriff.” Sixteen years and the legend kept growing, a cattle carcass bloating in the sun.

“I expect not. We don’t get the paper up here, ’cept when the mail train comes in. I do recall mention that some folks are thinkin’ yer Mollies weren’t really the bad guys. Maybe the railroad lads had a hand in them killin’s.”

“That’s true. It’s also true that sometimes a horsethief gets hanged for another scoundrel’s misdeed. The books get balanced either way, don’t they? Everybody in Schuylkill got what they wanted.”

Murtaugh said, “Might put that theory to the twenty sods as got hung up to dry.”

I sucked on my cigarette, studied the ash drifting toward my knees. “Sheriff, did you ever talk to Hicks?”

“Bumped into him at one of the saloons durin’ a faro game. Said howdy. No occasion for a philosophical debate.”

“Anything he do or say seem odd?” I proffered my smoke.

“Sure. He smelled right foul and he wasn’t winnin’ any blue ribbons on account o’ his handsome looks. He had fits—somethin’ to do with his nerves, accordin’ to Doc Campion.” Murtaugh extended his hand and accepted the cigarette. He dragged, made an appreciative expression and closed his eyes. “I dunno, I myself ain’t ever seen Hicks foamin’ at the mouth. Others did, I allow.”

“And that’s it?”

“Y’mean, did the lad strike me as a thief and a murderer? I’m bound to say no more’n the rest o’ the cowpunchers and prospectors that drift here. I allow most of ’em would plug you for a sawbuck… or a smoke.” He grinned, rubbed ashes from his fingers. “Y’mentioned nothing stuck to our lad. Has that changed?”

“The evidence is pending.”

“Think he did it?”

“I think he’s doing it now.”

“But you can’t prove it.”

“Nope.”

“So, officially you’re here to collect P.T.’s long lost valuables. I imagine Hicks is mighty attached to that book by now. Probbly won’t part with it without a fight.”

“Probably not.”

“Billy Cullins might be fittin’ him for a pine box, I suppose.”

I pulled out a roll of wrinkled bills, subtracted a significant number and tossed them on the desk. Plenty more where that came from, hidden under a floorboard at the hotel. I always travel flush. “The agency’s contribution to the Purdon widows and orphans fund.”

“Much obliged, Mr. K. Whole lotta widows and orphans in these parts.”

“More every day,” I said.

5

BELPHEGOR IS YOUR FATHERMOTHER. *This carmine missive scrawled in a New Orleans hotel room. In the unmade bed, a phallus sculpted from human excrement. Flies crawled upon the sheets, buzzing and sluggish.*

In Lubbock, a partially burned letter—“O FatherMother, may the blood of the—(indecipherable)—erate urchin be pleasing in thy throat. I am of the tradition.”

Come Albuquerque, the deterioration had accelerated. Hicks did not bother to destroy this particular letter, rather scattered its befouled pages on the floor among vermiculate designs scriven in blood—“worms, godawful! i am changed! Blessed the sacrament of decay! Glut Obloodyhole O bloodymaggots Obloodybowels O Lordof shite! Fearthegash! iamcomeiamcome”

Finally, Bakersfield in script writ large upon a flophouse wall—

EATEATEATEATEAT! *Found wedged under a mattress, the severed hand and arm of an unidentified person. Doubtless a young female. The authorities figured these remains belonged to a prostitute. Unfortunately, a few of them were always missing.*

The locket in the delicate fist was inscribed, For my little girl. *I recalled the bulls that stripped the room laughing when they read that. I also recalled busting one guy's jaw later that evening after we all got a snoot-full at the watering hole. I think it was a dispute over poker.*

6

Trosper didn't enjoy seeing me at the bar. He knew what I was and what it meant from a mile off. First words out of his egg-sucker's mouth, "Lookit here, mister, I don't want no bullshit from you. You're buyin' or you're walkin'. Or Jake might have somethin' else for you."

I couldn't restrain my smile. The banty roosters always got me. "Easy, friend. Gimme two fingers of coffin varnish. Hell, make it a round for the house."

The Longrifle was a murky barn devoid of all pretense to grandeur. This was the trough of the hard-working, harder drinking peasantry. It was presently dead as three o'clock. Only me, Trosper and a wiry cowboy with a crimped, sullen face who nursed a beer down the line. Jake, I presumed.

Trosper made quick work of getting the whiskey into our glasses. He corked the bottle and left it in front of me.

I swallowed fast, smacked the glass onto the counter. "Ugh. I think my left eye just went blind."

"Give the Chinaman a music lesson or shove off, pig. You ain't got no jurydiction here."

"Happy to oblige." I did the honors. Flames crackled in my belly, spread to my chest and face. Big grandad clock behind the bar ticked too loudly.

Good old Jake had tipped back his hat and shifted in his chair to affright me with what I'm sure was his darkest glare. Bastard had a profile sharp as a hatchet. A regulator, a bullyboy. He was heeled with a fair-sized peashooter in a shoulder rig.

I belted another swig to fix my nerves, banged the glass hard enough to raise dust. Motes drifted lazily, planetoids orbiting streams of light from the rain-blurred panes. I said to Trosper, "I hear tell you're chummy with a bad man goes by Tom Mullen."

Jake said, soft and deadly, “He told you to drink or get on shank’s mare.” Goddamned if the cowboy didn’t possess the meanest drawl I’d heard since ever. First mistake was resting a rawboned hand on the butt of his pistola. Second mistake was not skinning said iron.

So I shot him twice. Once in the belly, through the buckle; once near the collar of his vest. Jake fell off his stool and squirmed in the sawdust. His hat tumbled away. He had a thick mane of blond hair with a perfect pink circle at the crown. That’s what you got for wearing cowboy hats all the fucking time.

Making conversation with Trosper, who was currently frozen into a homely statue, I said, “Don’t twitch or I’ll nail your pecker to the floor.” I walked over to Jake. The cowpoke was game; by then he almost had his gun free with the off hand. I stamped on his wrist until it cracked. He hissed. I smashed in his front teeth with a couple swipes from the heel of my boot. That settled him down.

I resumed my seat, poured another drink. “Hey, what’s the matter? You haven’t seen a man get plugged before? What kind of gin mill you running?” My glance swung to the dim ceiling and its mosaic of bullet holes and grease stains. “Oh, they usually shoot the hell out of your property, not each other. Tough luck the assholes got it all backwards. Come on, Trosper. Take a snort. This hooch you sling the shit-kickers kinda grows on a fellow.”

Trosper was gray as his apron and sweating. His hands jerked. “H-he, uh, he’s got a lotta friends, mister.”

“I have lots of bullets. Drink, amigo.” After he’d gulped his medicine I said, “All right. Where were we? Oh, yes. Mr. Mullen. I’m interested in meeting him. Any notions?”

“Used to come in here every couple weeks; whenever he had dust in his poke. Drank. Played cards with some of the boys from the Bar-H. Humped the girls pretty regular over to the Honeybee.”

“Uh, huh. A particular girl?”

“No. He din’t have no sweetheart.”

“When’s the last time you saw him?”

Trosper thought about that. “Dunno. Been a spell. Christ, is Jake dead? He ain’t movin’.”

“I’ll be damned. He isn’t. Pay attention. Mullen’s gone a-prospecting you say?”

“Wha-yeah. Mister, I dunno. He came in with dust is all I’m sayin’.” Trosper’s eyes were glassy. “I dunno shit, mister. Could be he moved on. I ain’t his keeper.”

“The sheriff mentioned Hicks had a condition.”

“He’s got the Saint Vitus dance. You know, he trembles like a drunk ain’t had his eye-opener. Saw him fall down once; twitched and scratched at his face somethin’ awful. When it was over, he just grinned real pasty like, and made a joke about it.”

I got the names and descriptions of the Bar-H riders, not that I’d likely interview them. As I turned to leave, I said, “Okay, Trosper. I’ll be around, maybe stop in for a visit, see if your memory clears up. Here’s a twenty. That should cover a box.”

7

I was riding a terrific buzz, equal parts whiskey and adrenaline, when I flopped on a plush divan in the parlor of the Honeybee Ranch. A not-too-uncomely lady-of-the-house pried off my muddy boots and rubbed oil on my feet. The Madame, a frigate in purple who styled herself as Octavia Plantagenet, provided me a Cuban cigar from a velvet humidor. She expertly lopped the tip with a fancy silver-chased cutter and got it burning, quirking suggestively as she worked the barrel between her fat red lips. The roses painted on her cheeks swelled like bellows.

The Honeybee swam in the exhaust of chortling hookahs and joints of Kentucky bluegrass. A swarthy fellow plucked his sitar in accompany to the pianist, cementing the union of Old World decadence and frontier excess. Here was a refined wilderness of thick Persian carpet and cool brass; no plywood, but polished mahogany; no cheap glass, but exquisite crystal. The girls wore elaborate gowns and mink-slick hair piled high, batted glitzy lashes over eyes twinkly as gemstones. Rouge, perfume, sequins and

charms, the whole swarming mess an intoxicating collaboration of artifice and lust.

Madame Octavia recalled Hicks. “Tommy Mullen? Sorry-lookin’ fella, what with the nerve disorder. Paid his tab. Not too rough on the merchandise, if he did have breath to gag a maggot. Only Lydia and Connie could stomach that, but he didn’t complain. Lord, he hasn’t been by in a coon’s age. I think he headed back east.”

I inquired after Violet and was told she’d be available later. Perhaps another girl? I said I’d wait and accepted four-fingers of cognac in King George’s own snifter. The brandy was smooth and I didn’t notice the wallop it packed until maroon lampshades magnified the crowd of genteel gamblers, businessmen and blue-collar stiffs on their best behavior, distorted them in kaleidoscopic fashion. Tinkling notes from Brahms reverberated in my brain long after the short, thick Austrian player in the silk vest retired for a nip at the bar.

Fame preceded me. Seemed everybody who could decipher news print had read about my exploits in Pennsylvania. They knew all there was to know about how I infiltrated the Workers Benevolent Association and sent a score of murderous union extremists to the gallows with my testimony. Depending upon one’s social inclinations, I was a champion of commerce and justice, or a no-good, yellow-bellied skunk. It was easy to tell who was who from the assorted smiles and sneers. The fact I’d recently ventilated a drover at the Longrifle was also a neat conversation starter.

Octavia encouraged a muddled procession of counterfeit gentry to ogle the infamous Pinkerton, a bulldozer of the first water from the Old States. Deduction was for the highbrows in top hats and great coats; I performed my detecting with a boot and a six-gun. I’d bust your brother’s head or bribe your mother if that’s what it took to hunt you to ground and collect my iron men. Rumor had it I’d strong arm the pope himself. Not much of a stretch as I never was impressed with that brand of idolatry.

Introductions came in waves—Taylor Hackett, bespectacled owner of the Bar-H cattle ranch; Norton Smythe, his stuffed-suit counterpart in the realm of gold mining; Ned Cates, Bob Tunny and Harry Edwards, esteemed investors of the Smythe & Ruth Mining Company, each beaming and

guffawing, too many teeth bared. An Eastern Triad. I asked them if they ate of The Master's sacrifice, but nobody appeared to understand and I relented while their waxy grins were yet in place. Blowsy as a poleaxed mule, I hadn't truly allowed for the possibility of my quarry snuggled in the fold of a nasty little cult. Hicks was a loner. I hoped.

After the contents of the snifter evaporated and got replenished like an iniquitous cousin to the Horn of Plenty, the lower caste made its rounds in the persons of Philmore Kavanaugh, journalist for some small town rag that recently folded and sent him penniless to the ends of creation; Dalton Beaumont, chief deputy and unloved cousin of Sheriff Murtaugh; John Brown, a wrinkled alderman who enjoyed having his toes sucked and daubed mother of pearl right there before God and everyone; Michael Piers, the formerly acclaimed French poet, now sunk into obscurity and bound for an early grave judging from the violence of his cough and the bloody spackle on his embroidered handkerchief. And others and others and others. I gave up on even trying to focus and concentrated on swilling without spilling.

There wasn't any sort of conversation, precisely. More the noise of an aroused hive. I waded through streams and tributaries from the great lake of communal thrum—

"—let some daylight into poor Jake. There'll be the devil to pay, mark me!"

"Langston gone to seed in Chinatown. A bloody shame—"

"First Holmes, now Stevenson. Wretched, wretched—"

"—the Ancient Order of Hibernia gets you your goddamned Molly Maguires and that's a fact. Shoulda hung a few more o' them Yankee bastards if you ask me—"

"—Welsh thick as ticks, doped out of their faculties on coolie mud. They've still got the savage in them. Worse than the red plague—"

"Two years, Ned. Oh, all right. Three years. The railroad gobbles up its share and I get the pieces with promising glint. California is weighed and measured, my friend. We'll run the independent operations into the dirt. Moonlighters don't have a prayer—"

"—Barnum, for gawd's sake! Anybody tell him—"

“I hate the circus. Stinks to high heaven. I hate those damned clowns too —”

“No. Langston’s dead—”

“—poked her for fun. Dry hump and the bitch took my folding—”

“—Mullen? Hicks? Dunno an don’ care. Long gone, long gone—”

“The hell, you say! He’s bangin’ the gong at the Forty-Mile Camp, last I heard—”

“—the Professor’s on the hip? I thought he sailed across the pond—”

“My dear, sweet woman-child. As quoth The Bard:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale

Her infinite variety;

“It wasn’t enough the cunt sacked me. ’E bloody spit in my face, the bloody wanker—”

“—stones to *kill* a man—”

“Ah, I could do the job real nice—”

Where most she satisfies; for vilest

things—

“—I mean, look at ’im. He’s a facking mechanical—”

“So, I says, lookee here, bitch, I’ll cut your—”

Become themselves in her

“—suck my cock or die! Whoopie! I’m on a hellbender, fellas!”

“—don’t care. Murtaugh should string his ass from the welcome sign—”

“I met your Hicks. He was nothing really special.” Piers blew a cloud of pungent clove exhaust, watched it eddy in the currents. “Thees circus freak of yours. He had a beeg mouth.”

My head wobbled. “Always pegged him for the strong silent type. Ha, ha.”

“No.” Piers waved impatiently. “He had a beeg mouth. Drooled, how do you say?—Like an eediot. A fuck-ing eediot.”

“Where?” I wheezed.

“Where? How do I know where? Ask the fuck-ing Professor. Maybe he knows where. The Professor knows everyone.”

“There you are, darling,” crooned Madame Octavia as if I had suddenly re-materialized. Her ponderous breasts pressed against my ribs. Her choice of scent brought tears to my eyes. “This gig is drying up, baby. It’s a tourist trap. Ooh, Chi-Town is where the action is. Isn’t Little Egypt a pistol? Hoochie-koochie baby!”

Red lights. White faces. Shadows spreading cracks.

I dropped the snifter from disconnected fingers. Thank goodness Octavia was there with a perfumed cloth to blot the splash. I was thinking, yes, indeed, a tragedy about Robert Louis; a step above the penny dreadfuls, but my hero nonetheless.

Where was Violet? Coupled to a banker? A sodbuster? Hoochie-koochie all night long.

“Excuse, me, Mr. Koenig.” An unfamiliar voice, a visage in silhouette.

“Ah, Frankie, he’s just laying about waiting for one of my girls—”

“Sheriff’s business, Miss Octavia. Please, sir. We’ve been sent to escort you to the office. Levi, he’s dead weight, get his other arm. You too, Dalton. There’s a lad.” The sheriff’s boys each grabbed a limb and hoisted me up as if on angels’ wings.

“The cavalry,” I said.

Scattered applause. A bawdy ragtime tune. Hungry mouths hanging slack.

And the muzzy lamps. Red. Black.

8

“What do you call him?”

“Chemosh. Baal-Peeor. Belphegor. No big deal, the Moabites are dust. They won’t mind if the title gits slaughtered by civilized folks.”

“We’re a fair piece from Moab.”

“Belphegor speaks many tongues in many lands.”

“A world traveler, eh?”

“That’s right, Pinky.”

“This friend of yours, he speaks to you through the shitter?”

“Yeah.”

“Interesting. Seems a tad inelegant.”

“Corruption begets corruption, Pinky,” says Hicks. His eyes are brown, hard as baked earth. Gila monster’s eyes. He once raised a four hundred pound stone above his head, balanced it in his palm to the cheers of mobs. Could reach across the table and crush my throat, even with the chains. Calcium deposits mar his fingers, distend from his elbows not unlike spurs. There is a suspicious lump under his limp hair, near the brow. He’s sinewy and passive in the Chair of Questions. “What’s more lunatic than fallin’ down before the image of a man tacked to a cross? Nothin’. You don’t even git nothin’ fun. I aim to have fun.”

I’m fascinated by the wet mouth in the bronzed face. It works, yes indeed it articulates most functionally. Yet it yawns, slightly yawns, as if my captive strongman was victim of a palsy, or the reverse of lockjaw. Saliva beads and dangles on viscous threads. I gag on the carnivore’s stench gusting from the wound. His teeth are chipped and dark as flint. Long. I ask, “What are you?”

“Holes close. Holes open. I’m an Opener. They Who Wait live through me. What about you?”

“I’m an atheist.” That was a half-truth, but close enough for government work.

“Good on you, Pinky. You’re on your way. And here’s Tuttle.” He indicates a prim lawyer in a crisp suit. “P.T. only hires the best. Adios, pal.”

Three weeks later, when Hicks strolls out of Cedar Grove Sanitarium, I’m not surprised at the message he leaves—CLOSE A HOLE AND ANOTHER OPENS.

Funny, funny world. It’s Tuttle who pays the freight for my hunting expedition into the American West.

Deputy Levi called it protective custody. They dumped me on a cot in a cell. Murtaugh's orders to keep me from getting lynched by some of Jake's confederates. These confederates had been tying one on down at the Longrifle, scene of the late, lamented Jake's demise. Murtaugh wasn't sorry to see a "cockeyed snake like that little sonofabitch" get planted. The sheriff promised to chat with Trosper regarding the details of our interview. It'd be straightened out by breakfast.

I fell into the amber and drowned.

Things clumped together in a sticky collage—

Hicks leering through the bars, his grin as prodigious as a train tunnel.

Violet's wheat-blonde head bowed at my groin and me so whiskey-flaccid I can only sweat and watch a cockroach cast a juggernaut shadow beneath a kerosene lamp while the sheriff farts and snores at his desk.

Jake shits himself, screams soundlessly as my boot descends, hammer of the gods.

Lincoln waves to the people in the balconies. His eyes pass directly over me. I'm twenty-two, I'm hell on wheels. In three minutes I'll make my first kill. Late bloomer.

"I once was lost. Now I'm found. The Soldier's Friend, Sister M, had a hold on me, yes sir, yesiree."

"I give up the needle and took to the bottle like a babe at his mama's nipple."

"Never had a wife, never needed one. I took up the traveling life, got married to my gun."

A man in a suit doffs his top hat and places his head into the jaws of a bored lion. The jaws close.

A glossy pink labium quakes and begins to yield, an orchid brimming with ancient stars.

"How many men you killed, Jonah?" Violet strokes my superheated brow.

"Today?"

"No, silly! I mean, in all. The grand total."

"More than twenty. More every day."

Sun eats stars. Moon eats sun. Black hole eats Earth.

Hicks winks a gory eye, an idiot lizard, gives the sheriff a languid, slobbery kiss that glistens snail slime. When the sackcloth of ashes floats to oblivion and I can see again, the beast is gone, if he ever was.

The door creaks with the storm. Open. Shut.

Violet sighs against my sweaty chest, sleeps in reinvented innocence.

There's a crack in the ceiling and it's dripping.

10

I did the expedient thing—holed up in my hotel room for a week, drinking the hair of the dog that bit me and screwing Violet senseless.

I learned her daddy was a miner who was blown to smithereens. No mother; no kin as would take in a coattail relation from the boondocks. But she had great teeth and a nice ass. Fresh meat for Madame Octavia's stable. She was eighteen and real popular with the gentlemen, Miss Violet was. Kept her earnings tucked in a sock, was gonna hop the mail train to San Francisco one of these fine days, work as a showgirl in an upscale dance hall. Heck, she might even ride the rail to Chicago, meet this Little Egypt who was the apple of the city's eye. Yeah.

She finally asked me if I'd ever been married—it was damned obvious I wasn't at present—and I said no. Why not? Lucky, I guessed.

"Mercy, Jonah, you got some mighty peculiar readin' here." Violet was lying on her belly, thumbing through my Latin version of the *Pseudomonarchia Daemonum*. Her hair was tangled; perspiration glowed on her ivory flanks.

I sprawled naked, propped against the headboard, smoking while I cleaned and oiled my Winchester Model 1886. Best rifle I'd ever owned; heavy enough to drop a buffalo, but perfect for men. It made me a tad wistful to consider that I wasn't likely to use it on Hicks. I figured him for close-quarters.

Gray and yellow out the window. Streets were a quagmire. I watched figures mucking about, dropping planks to make corduroy for the wagons. Occasionally a gun popped.

For ten dollars and an autograph, Deputy Levi had compiled a list of deaths and disappearances in Purdon and environs over the past four months, hand delivered it to my doorstep. Two pages long. Mostly unhelpful—routine shootings and stabbings, claim-jumping and bar brawls, a whole slew of accidents. I did mark the names of three prospectors who'd vanished. They worked claims separated by many miles of inhospitable terrain. Each had left a legacy of food, equipment and personal items—no money, though. No hard cash. No gold dust.

Violet gasped when she came to some unpleasant and rather florid illustrations. "Lordy! That's… awful. You believe in demons and such, Jonah?" Curiosity and suspicion struggled to reconcile her tone.

"Nope. But other folks do."

"Tommy Mullen—he does?" Her eyes widened. I glimpsed Hicks, a gaunt satyr loitering in the Honeybee parlor while the girls drew lots to seal a fate.

"I expect he does." I slapped her pale haunch. "Come on over here, sweetness. It isn't for you to fret about." And to mitigate the dread transmitted through her trembling flesh, I said, "He's hightailed to the next territory. I'm wasting daylight in this burg." Her grateful mouth closed on me and her tongue moved, rough and supple. I grabbed the bed post. "Pardon me, not completely wasting it."

Three miners. Picture-clear, the cabins, lonely, isolated. A black shape sauntering from an open door left swinging in its wake. Crows chattering in poplar branches, throaty chuckle of a stream.

I drowsed. The hotel boy knocked and reported a Chinaman was waiting in the lobby. The man bore me an invitation from Langston Butler. Professor Butler, to his friends. The note, in handsome script, read:

> Sashay on out to Forty-Mile Camp and I'll tell you how to snare the Iron Man. Cordially, L. Butler.

I dressed in a hurry. Violet groaned, started to rise, but I kissed her on the mouth and said to take the afternoon off. Indulging a bout of prescience, I left some money on the dresser. A lot of money. The money basically said, "If you're smart you'll be on the next train to San Francisco; next stop the Windy City."

I hoped Murtaugh had successfully smoothed all the feathers I'd ruffled. This was my best suit and I sure didn't want to get any holes in it.

11

Forty-Mile Camp was not, as its appellation suggested, forty miles from Purdon. The jolting ride in Hung Chan's supply wagon lasted under three hours by my pocket watch. Hung didn't speak to me at all. I rode shotgun, riveted by the payload of flour, sugar and sundries, not the least of which happened to include a case of weathered, leaky dynamite.

We wound along Anderson Creek Canyon, emerged in a hollow near some dredges and a mongrel collection of shacks. Cook-fires sputtered, monarch butterflies under cast-iron pots tended by women the color of ash. There were few children and no dogs. Any male old enough to handle pick, shovel or pan was among the clusters of men stolidly attacking the earth, wading in the frigid water, toiling among the rocky shelves above the encampment.

Nobody returned my friendly nod. Nobody even really looked at me except for two men who observed the proceedings from a copse of scraggly cottonwoods, single-shot rifles slung at half-mast. My hackles wouldn't lie down until Hung led me through the camp to a building that appeared to be three or four shanties in combination. He ushered me through a thick curtain and into a dim, moist realm pungent with body musk and opium tang.

"Koenig, at last. Pull up a rock." Butler lay on a pile of bear pelts near a guttering fire pit. He was wrapped in a Navajo blanket, but clearly emaciated. His misshapen skull resembled a chunk of anthracite sufficiently dense to crook his neck. His dark flesh had withered tight as rawhide and he appeared to be an eon older than his stentorian voice sounded. In short, he could've been a fossilized anthropoid at repose in Barnum's House of Curiosities.

Butler's attendant, a toothless crone with an evil squint, said, "*Mama die?*" She gently placed a long, slender pipe against his lips, waited for him to draw the load. She hooked another horrible glance my way and didn't offer to cook me a pill.

After a while Butler said, “You would’ve made a wonderful Templar.”

“Except for the minor detail of suspecting Christianity is a pile of crap. Chopping down Saracens for fun and profit, that I could’ve done.”

“You’re a few centuries late. A modern-day crusader, then. An educated man, I presume?”

“Harvard, don’t you know.” I pronounced it Hah-vahd to maximize the irony.

“An *expensive* education; although, aren’t they all. Still, a Pinkerton, tsk, tsk. Daddy was doubtless shamed beyond consolation.”

“Papa Koenig was annoyed. One of the slickest New York lawyers you’ll ever do battle with—came from a whole crabbed scroll of them. Said I was an ungrateful iconoclast before he disowned me. Hey, it’s easier to shoot people than try to frame them, I’ve discovered.”

“And now you’ve come to shoot poor Rueben Hicks.”

“Rueben Hicks is a thief, a murderer and a cannibal. Seems prudent to put him down if I get the chance.”

“Technically a cannibal is one that feeds on its own species.”

I said, “Rueben doesn’t qualify as a member?”

“That depends on your definition of human, Mr. Koenig.” Butler said, and smiled. The contortion had a ghoulish effect on his face. “Because it goes on two legs and wears a coat and tie? Because it knows how to say please and thank you?”

“Why do I get the feeling this conversation is headed south? People were talking about you in town. You’re a folk legend at the whorehouse.”

“A peasant hero, as it were?”

“More like disgraced nobility. I can’t figure what you’re doing here. Could’ve picked a more pleasant climate to go to seed.”

“I came to Purdon ages ago. Sailed from London where I had pursued a successful career in anthropology—flunked medical school, you see. Too squeamish. I dabbled in physics and astronomy, but primitive culture has always been my obsession. Its rituals, its primal energy.”

“Plenty of primitive culture here.”

“Quite.”

“*Mama die?”* said the hag as she brandished the pipe.

Butler accepted the crone’s ministrations. His milky eyes flared, and when he spoke, he spoke more deliberately. “I’ve been following your progress. You are capable, resourceful, tenacious. I fear Rueben will swallow you alive, but if anyone has a chance to put a stop to his wickedness it is you.”

“Lead has a sobering effect on most folks.” I said. “Strange to hear a debauched occultist like yourself fussing about wickedness. I take it you’ve got a personal stake in this manhunt. He must’ve hurt your feelings or something.”

“Insomuch as I know he intends to use me as a blood sacrifice, I’m extremely interested.”

“You ever thought of clearing out?”

“Impossible.”

“Why impossible?”

“Gravity, Mr. Koenig.” Butler took another hit. Eventually, he said in a dreamy tone, “I’m a neglectful host. Care to bang the gong?”

“Thanks, no.”

“A reformed addict. How rare.”

“I’ll settle for being a drunk. What’s your history with Hicks?”

“We were introduced in ’78. I was in Philadelphia and had taken in the circus with some colleagues from the university. I fell in with a small group of the players after the show, Rueben being among this number. We landed in a tiny café, a decadent slice of gay Paris, and everybody was fabulously schnockered, to employ the argot. Rueben and I got to talking and we hit it off. I was amazed at the breadth, and I blush to admit, scandalous nature of his many adventures. He was remarkably cultured behind the provincial façade. I was intrigued. Smitten, too.”

I said, “And here I thought Hicks was a ladies man.”

“Rueben is an opportunist. We retired to my flat; all very much a night’s work for me. Then… then after we’d consummated our mutual fascination,

he said he wanted to show me something that would change my life. Something astounding."

"Do tell."

"We were eating mushrooms. A mysterious variety—Rueben stole them from P.T. and P.T. obtained them from this queer fellow who dealt in African imports. I hallucinated that Rueben caused a window to open in the bedroom wall, a portal into space. Boggling! Millions of stars blazed inches from my nose, a whole colossal bell-shaped galaxy of exploded gases and cosmic dust. The sight would've driven Copernicus insane. It was a trick, stage magic. Something he'd borrowed from his fellow performers. He asked me what I saw and I told him. His face… there was something wrong. Too rigid, too cold. For a moment, I thought he'd put on an extremely clever mask and I was terrified. And his mouth… His expression melted almost instantly, and he was just Rueben again. I knew better, though. And, unfortunately, my fascination intensified. Later, when he showed me the portal trick, this time sans hallucinogens, I realized he wasn't simply a circus performer. He claimed to be more than human, to have evolved into a superior iteration of the genus. A flawed analysis, but at least partially correct."

Hick's rubbery grin bobbed to the surface of my mind. "He's crazed, I'll give you that."

"Rueben suffers from a unique breed of mycosis—you've perhaps seen the tumors on his arms and legs, and especially along his spinal column? It's consuming him as a fungus consumes a tree. Perversely, it's this very parasitic influence that imbues him with numerous dreadful abilities. Evolution via slow digestion."

"Dreadful abilities? If he'd showed me a hole in the wall that looked on the moon's surface I might've figured he was a fakir, or Jesus' little brother, or what have you. He didn't. He didn't fly out of Cedar Grove, either."

"Scoff as you will. Ignorance is all the blessing we apes can hope for."

"What became of your torrid love affair?"

"He and I grew close. He confided many terrible things to me, unspeakable deeds. Ultimately I determined to venture here and visit his childhood haunts, to discover the wellspring of his vitality, the source of his

preternatural affinities. He warned me, albeit such caveats were mere inducements to an inquisitive soul. I was so easily corrupted." Butler's voice trailed off as he was lost in reflection.

Corruption begets corruption, copper. "Sounds very romantic," I said. "What were you after? The gold? Nah, the gold is panned out or property of the companies. Mating practices of the natives?"

"I coveted knowledge, Mr. Koenig. Rueben whispered of a way to unlock the secrets of brain and blood, to lay bare the truth behind several of mankind's squalid superstitions. To walk the earth as a god. His mind is far from scientific, and but remotely curious. One could nearly categorize him as a victim of circumstance in this drama. I, however, presumably equipped with superior intellect, would profit all the more than my barbarous concubine. My potential seemed enormous."

"Yes, and look at you now, Professor," I said. "Do these people understand what you are?"

"What do you think I am, Detective?"

"A Satan-worshipping dope fiend."

"Wrong. I'm a naturalist. Would that I could reinvent my innocent dread of God and Satan, of supernatural phenomena. As for these yellow folk, they don't care what I am. I pay well for my upkeep and modest pleasures."

"For a man who's uncovered great secrets of existence, your accommodations lack couth."

"Behold the reward of hubris. I could've done as Rueben has—descended completely into the womb of an abominable mystery and evolved as a new and perfect savage. Too cowardly—I tasted the ichor of divinity and quailed, fled to this hovel and my drugs. My memories. Wisdom devours the weak." He shuddered and spat a singsong phrase that brought the old woman scuttling to feed him another load of dope. After he'd recovered, he produced a leather-bound book from beneath his pillow. The *Dictionnaire Infernal*. "A gift from our mutual acquaintance. Please, take it. These 'forbidden' tomes are surpassingly ludicrous."

I inspected the book; de Plancy's signature swooped across the title page. "Did Rueben travel all this way to fetch you a present and off a few hapless

miners as a bonus?”

“Rueben has come home because he must, it is an integral component of his metamorphosis. Surely you’ve detected his quickening purpose, the apparent degeneration of his faculties, which is scarcely a symptom of decay, but rather a sign of fundamental alteration. Pupation. He has returned to this place to commune with his benefactor, to disgorge the red delights of his gruesome and sensuous escapades. Such is the pact between them. It is the pact all supplicants make. It was mine, before my defection.”

My skin prickled at the matter-of-fact tone Butler affected. I said, “I don’t get this, Professor. If you don’t hold with demons and all that bunkum, what the hell are you worshipping?”

“Supplicating, dear boy. I didn’t suggest we are alone in the cosmos. Certain monstrous examples of cryptogenetics serve the function of godhead well enough. That *scholars* invent fanciful titles and paint even more fanciful pictures does not diminish the essential reality of these organisms, only obscures it.”

My suspicions about Butler’s character were sharpening with the ebb and pulse of fire light. He lay coiled in his nest, a diamondback ready to strike. Not wanting an answer, I said, “Exactly what did you do to acquire this… knowledge?”

“I established communion with a primordial intelligence, a cyclopean plexus rooted below these hills and valleys. An unclassified mycoflora that might or might not be of terrestrial origin. There are rites to effect this dialogue. A variety of osmosis ancient as the sediment men first crawled from. Older! Most awful, I assure you.”

“Christ, you’ve got holes in your brain from smoking way too much of the black O.” I stood, covering my emotions with a grimace. “Next thing you’ll tell me is Oberon came prancing from under his hill to sprinkle that magic fairy shit on you.”

“You are the detective. Don’t blame me if this little investigation uncovers things that discomfit your world view.”

“Enough. Tell it to Charlie Darwin when you meet in hell. You want me to nail Hicks, stow the campfire tales and come across with his location.”

“Rueben’s visited infrequently since late spring. Most recently, three days ago. He promised to take me with him soon, to gaze once more upon the FatherMother. Obviously I don’t wish to make that pilgrimage. I’d rather die a nice peaceful death—being lit on fire, boiled in oil, staked to an ant hill. That sort of thing.”

“Is he aware of my presence in Purdon?”

“Of course. He expected you weeks ago. I do believe he mentioned some casual harm to your person, opportunity permitting. Rest assured it never occurred to him that I might betray his interests, that I would dare. Frankly, I doubt he considers you a real threat—not here in his demesne. Delusion is part and parcel with his condition.”

“Where is he right now?”

“Out and about. Satiating his appetites. Perhaps wallowing in the Presence. His ambit is wide and unpredictable. He may pop in tomorrow. He may appear in six months. Time means less and less to him. Time is a ring, and in the House of Belphegor that ring contracts like a muscle.”

“The house?”

Butler’s lips twitched at the corners. He said, “A cell in a black honeycomb. Rueben’s father stumbled upon it during his missionary days. He had no idea what it was. The chamber existed before the continents split and the ice came over the world. The people that built it, long dust. I can give directions, but I humbly suggest you wait here for your nemesis. Safer.”

“No harm in looking,” I said.

“Oh, no, Mr. Koenig. There’s more harm than you could ever dream.”

“Enlighten me anyhow.”

Butler seemed to have expected nothing less. Joyful as a sadist, he drew me a map.

12

The cave wasn’t far from camp.

Long-suffering Hung Chan and his younger brother Ha agreed to accompany me to the general area after a harangue from Butler and the exchange of American currency.

We essayed a thirty-minute hike through scrub and streams, then up a steep knoll littered with brush and treacherous rocks. Invisible from a distance, a limestone cliff face split vertically, formed a narrow gash about the height of the average man. The Chan brothers informed me through violent gestures and Pidgin English they'd await my return at the nearby riverbank. They retreated, snarling to themselves in their foreign dialect.

I crouched behind some rocks and cooled my heels for a lengthy spell. Nothing and more nothing. When I couldn't justify delaying any longer, I approached cautiously, in case Hicks was lying in ambush, rifle sights trained on the rugged slope. Immediately I noticed bizarre symbols scratched into the occasional boulder. Seasonal erosion had obliterated all save the deepest marks and these meant little to me, though it wasn't difficult to imagine they held some pagan significance. Also, whole skeletons of small animals—birds and squirrels—hung from low branches. Dozens of them, scattered like broken teeth across the hillside.

According to my pocket watch and the dull slant of sun through the clouds, I had nearly two hours of light. I'd creep close, have a peek and scurry back to the mining camp in time for supper. No way did I intend to navigate these backwoods after dark and risk breaking a leg, or worse. I was a city boy at heart.

I scrambled from boulder to boulder, pausing to see if anyone would emerge to take a pot shot. When I reached the summit I was sweating and my nerves twanged like violin strings.

The stench of spoiled meat, of curdled offal, emanated from the fissure; a slaughterhouse gone to the maggots. The vile odor stung my eyes, scourged deep into my throat. I knotted a balaclava from a handkerchief I'd appropriated from the Bumblebee Ranch, covered my mouth and nose.

A baby? I cocked my ears and didn't breathe until the throb of my pulse filled the universe. No baby. The soft moan of wind sucked through a chimney of granite.

I waited for my vision to clear and passed through the opening, pistol drawn

13

so beautiful.

I

14

stare at a wedge of darkening sky between the pines.

My cheeks burn, scorched with salt. I've been lying here in the shallows of a pebbly stream. I clutch the solid weight of my pistol in a death grip. The Chan brothers loom, hardly inscrutable. They are pale as flour. Their lips move silently. Their hands are on me. They drag me.

I keep staring at the sky, enjoy the vibration of my tongue as I hum. Tralalala.

The brothers release my arms, slowly edge away like automata over the crushed twigs. Their eyes are holes. Their mouths. I'm crouched, unsteady. My gun. Click. Click. Empty. But my knife my Jim Bowie special is here somewhere is in my hand. Ssaa! The brothers Chan are phantoms, loping. Deer. Mirages. My knife. Quivers in a tree trunk.

Why am I so happy. Why must I cover myself in the leaves and dirt.

Rain patters upon my roof.

15

Time is a ring. Time is a muscle. It contracts.

16

colloidal iris

17

the pillar of faces

18

migrant spores

19

maggots

20

glows my ecstasy in a sea of suns

21

galactic parallax

22

I had been eating leaves. Or at least there were leaves crammed in my mouth. Sunlight dribbled through the gleaming branches. I vomited leaves. I found a trickle of water, snuffled no prouder than a hog.

Everything was small and bright. Steam seeped from my muddy clothes. My shirt was starched with ejaculate, matted to my belly as second skin. I knelt in the damp needles and studied my filthy hands. My hands were shiny as metal on a casket.

Butler chortled from a spider-cocoon in the green limbs, *"Now you're seasoned for his palette. Best run, Pinkerton. You've been in the sauce. Chewed up and shat out. And if you live, in twenty years you'll be another walking Mouth."* He faded into the woodwork.

I made a meticulous job of scrubbing the grime and blood from my hands. I washed my face in the ice water, hesitated at the sticky bur of my mustache and hair, finally dunked my head under. The shock brought comprehension crashing down around my ears.

I remembered crossing over a threshold.

Inside, the cave is larger than I'd supposed, and humid.

Water gurgling in rock. Musty roots the girth of sequoias.

Gargantuan statues embedded in wattles of amber.

The cave mouth a seam of brightness that rotates until it is a blurry hatch in the ceiling.

My boots losing contact with the ground, as if I were weightless.

Floating away from the light, towards a moist chasm, purple warmth.

Darkness blooms, vast and sweet.

Gibberish, after.

I walked back to Forty-Mile Camp, my thoughts pleasantly disjointed.

23

Labor ground to a halt when I stumbled into their midst. None spoke. No one tried to stop me from hunching over a kettle and slopping fistfuls of boiled rice, gorging like a beast. Nor when I hefted a rusty spade and padded into Butler's hut to pay my respects. Not even when I emerged, winded, and tore through the crates of supplies and helped myself to several sticks of dynamite with all the trimmings.

I smiled hugely at them, couldn't think of anything to say.

They stood in a half-moon, stoic as carvings. I wandered off into the hills.

24

The explosion was gratifying.

Dust billowed, a hammerhead cloud that soon collapsed under its own ambition. I thought of big sticks and bigger nests full of angry hornets. I wasn't even afraid, really.

Some open, others close.

25

After I pounded on the door for ten minutes, a girl named Evelyn came out and found me on the front porch of the whorehouse, slumped across the swing and muttering nonsense. Dawn was breaking and the stars were so pretty.

I asked for Violet. Evelyn said she'd lit a shuck from the Bumblebee Ranch for parts unknown.

Octavia took in my frightful appearance and started snapping orders. She and a couple of the girls lugged me to a room and shoved me in a scalding bath. I didn't protest; somebody slapped a bottle of whiskey in my hand and lost the cork. Somebody else must've taken one look at the needle work on my arm and decided to snag some morphine from Doc Campion's bag of black magic. They shot me to the moon and reality melted into a slag of velvet and honey. I tumbled off the wagon and got crushed under its wheels.

"You going home one of these days?" Octavia squeezed water from a sponge over my shoulders. "Back to the Old States?" She smelled nice. Everything smelled of roses and lavender; nice.

I didn't know what day this was. Shadows clouded the teak panels. This place was firecracker hot back in the '50s. What a hoot it must've been while the West was yet wild. My lips were swollen. I was coming down hard, a piece of rock plunging from the sky. I said, "Uh, huh. You?" It occurred to me that I was fixating again, probably worse than when I originally acquired my dope habits. Every time my eyes dilated I was thrust into a Darwinian phantasm. A fugue state wherein the chain of humanity shuttered rapidly from the first incomprehensible amphibian creature to slop ashore, through myriad semi-erect sapiens slouching across chaotically shifting landscapes, unto the frantic masses in coats and dresses teeming about the stone and glass of Earth's megalopolises. I had vertigo.

"Any day now."

My ears still rang, might always.

Fading to a speck—the hilltop, decapitated in a thunderclap and a belch of dust. Boulders reduced to shattered bits, whizzing around me, a miracle I wasn't pulverized. Was that me, pitching like Samson before the Philistine army? More unreal with each drip of scented wax. My eyes were wet. I turned my head so Octavia wouldn't notice.

"Tommy Mullen came around today. You're still lookin' for Tommy. Right?"

"You see him?"

“Naw. Kavanaugh was talkin’ to Dalton Beaumont, mentioned he saw Tommy on the street. Fella waved to him and went into an alley. Didn’t come out again. Could be he’s scared you’ll get a bead on him.”

“Could be.”

Octavia said, “Glynna heard tell Langston Butler passed on. Died in his sleep. Guess the yellow boys held a ceremony. Reverend Fuller’s talkin’ ’bout ridin’ to Forty-Mile, see that the Professor gets himself a Christian burial.” She became quiet, kneading my neck with steely fingers. Then, “I’m powerful sad. The Professor was a decent man. You know he was the sawbones for three, four years? He did for the young ’uns as got themselves with child. Gentle as a father. Campion came along and the Professor fell to the coolie mud. Shame.”

My smile was lye-hot and humorless. “He didn’t limit his moonlighting to abortions. Butler did for the babies too, didn’t he? The ones that were born here at the Ranch.”

Octavia didn’t answer.

All those whores’ babies tossed into a pitchy shaft, tiny wails smothered in the great chthonian depths. I laughed, hollow. “The accidents. Don’t see many orphanages this far north.”

Octavia said, “How do you mean to settle your tab, by the by?” She was getting colder by the second. She must’ve gone through my empty wallet.

“For services rendered? Good question, lady.”

“You gave your *whole* poke to Violet?” Her disbelief was tinged with scorn. “That’s plain loco, mister. Why?”

The room was fuzzy. “I don’t suppose I’ll be needing it, where I’m going. I did an impetuous deed, Octavia. Can’t take back the bet once it’s on the table.” Where was I going? Into a box into the ground, if I was lucky. The alternative was just too unhappy. I listened for the ticktock of transmogrifying cells that would indicate my descent into the realm of superhuman. Damnation; the bottle was dry. I dropped it into the sudsy water, watched it sink. Glowed there between my black and blue thighs.

“Musta been a heap of coin. You love her, or somethin’?”

I frowned. “Another excellent question. No, I reckon I don’t love her. She’s just too good for the likes of you, is all. Hate to see her spoil.”

Octavia left without even a kiss goodbye.

26

At least my clothes were washed and pressed and laid out properly.

I dressed with the ponderous calculation of a man on his way to a funeral. I cleaned my pistol, inspected the cylinder reflexively—it’s easy to tell how many bullets are loaded by the weight of the weapon in your hand.

The whores had shaved me and I cut a respectable figure except for the bruises and the sagging flesh under my eyes. My legs were unsteady. I went by the back stairs, unwilling to list through the parlor where the piano crashed and the shouts of evening debauchery swelled to a frenzied peak.

It was raining again; be snowing in another week or so. The mud-caked boardwalks stretched emptily before unlit shop windows. I shuffled, easily confused by the darkness and the rushing wind.

The hotel waited, tomb-dark and utterly desolate.

Like a man mounting the scaffold, I climbed the three flights of squeaking stairs to my room, turned the key in the lock after the fourth or fifth try, and knew what was what as I stepped through and long before anything began to happen.

The room stank like an abattoir. I lighted a lamp on the dresser and its frail luminance caught the edge of spikes and loops on the bathroom door. This scrawl read, *BELPHEGORBELPHEGORBELPHEGOR.*

The mirror shuddered. A mass of shadows unfolded in the corner, became a tower. Hicks whispered from a place behind and above my left shoulder, “Hello again, Pinky.”

“Hello yourself.” I turned and fired and somewhere between the yellow flash and the new hole in the ceiling He snatched my wrist and the pistol went caroming across the floor. I dangled; my trigger finger was broken and my elbow dislocated, but I didn’t feel a thing yet.

Hicks smiled almost kindly. He said, “I told you, Pinky. Close one hole, another opens.” His face split at the seams, a terrible flower bending toward my light, my heat.

Proboscis

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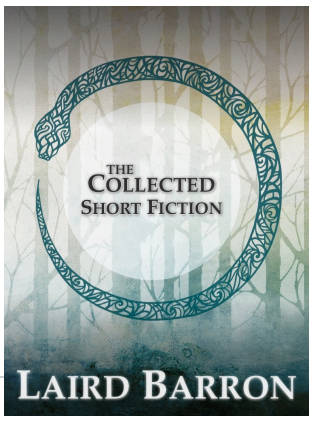

1

After the debacle in British Columbia, we decided to crash the Bluegrass festival. Not we—Cruz. Everybody else just shrugged and said yeah, whatever you say, dude. Like always. Cruz was the alpha-alpha of our motley pack.

We followed the handmade signs onto a dirt road and ended up in a muddy pasture with maybe a thousand other cars and beat-to-hell tourist buses. It was a regular extravaganza—pavilions, a massive stage, floodlights. A bit farther out, they'd built a bonfire, and Dead-Heads were writhing with pagan exuberance among the cinder-streaked shadows. The brisk air swirled heavy scents of marijuana and clove, of electricity and sex.

The amplified ukulele music was giving me a migraine. Too many people smashed together, limbs flailing in paroxysms. Too much white light followed by too much darkness. I'd gone a couple beers over my limit because my face was Novocain-numb and I found myself dancing with some sloe-eyed coed who'd fixed her hair in corn rows. Her shirt said *MILK*.

She was perhaps a bit prettier than the starlet I'd ruined my marriage with way back in the days of yore, but resembled her in a few details. What were the odds? I didn't even attempt to calculate. A drunken man cheek to cheek with a strange woman under the harvest moon was a tricky proposition.

"Lookin' for somebody, or just rubberneckin'?" The girl had to shout over the hi-fi jug band. Her breath was peppermint and whiskey.

“I lost my friends,” I shouted back. A sea of bobbing heads beneath a gulf of night sky and none of them belonged to anyone I knew. Six of us had piled out of two cars and now I was alone. Last of the Mohicans.

The girl grinned and patted my cheek. “You ain’t got no friends, Ray-bo.”

I tried to ask how she came up with that, but she was squirming and pointing over my shoulder.

“My gawd, look at all those stars, will ya?”

Sure enough the stars were on parade; cold, cruel radiation bleeding across improbable distances. I was more interested in the bikers lurking near the stage and the beer garden. Creepy and mean, spoiling for trouble. I guessed Cruz and Hart would be nearby, copping the vibe, as it were.

The girl asked me what I did and I said I was an actor between jobs. Anything she’d seen? No, probably not. Then I asked her and she said something I didn’t quite catch. It was either etymologist or entomologist. There was another thing, impossible to hear. She looked so serious I asked her to repeat it.

“Right through your meninges. Sorta like a siphon.”

“What?” I said.

“I guess it’s a delicacy. They say it don’t hurt much, but I say nuts to that.”

“A delicacy?”

She made a face. “I’m goin’ to the garden. Want a beer?”

“No, thanks.” As it was, my legs were ready to fold. The girl smiled, a wistful imp, and kissed me briefly, chastely. She was swallowed into the masses and I didn’t see her again.

After a while I staggered to the car and collapsed. I tried to call Sylvia, wanted to reassure her and Carly that I was okay, but my cell wouldn’t cooperate. Couldn’t raise my watchdog friend, Rob in LA. He’d be going bonkers too. I might as well have been marooned on a desert island. Modern technology, my ass. I watched the windows shift through a foggy spectrum of pink and yellow. Lulled by the monotone thrum, I slept.

Dreamt of wasp nests and wasps. And rare orchids, coronas tilted towards the awesome bulk of clouds. The flowers were a battery of organic radio

telescopes receiving a sibilant communiqué just below my threshold of comprehension.

A mosquito pricked me and when I crushed it, blood ran down my finger, hung from my nail.

2

Cruz drove. He said, “I wanna see the Mima Mounds.”

Hart said, “Who’s Mima?” He rubbed the keloid on his beefy neck.

Bulletproof glass let in light from a blob of moon. I slumped in the tricked-out back seat, where our prisoner would’ve been if we’d managed to bring him home. I stared at the grille partition, the leg irons and the doors with no handles. A crusty vein traced black tributaries on the floorboard. Someone had scratched R+G and a fanciful depiction of Ronald Reagan’s penis. This was an old car. It reeked of cigarette smoke, of stale beer, of a million exhalations.

Nobody asked my opinion. I’d melted into the background smear.

The brutes were smacked out of their gourds on junk they’d picked up on the Canadian side at the festival. Hart had tossed the bag of syringes and miscellaneous garbage off a bridge before we crossed the border. That was where we’d parted ways with the other guys—Leon, Rufus and Donnie. Donnie was the one who had gotten nicked by a stray bullet in Donkey Creek, earned himself bragging rights if nothing else. Jersey boys, the lot; they were going to take the high road home, maybe catch the rodeo in Montana.

Sunrise forged a pale seam above the distant mountains. We were rolling through certified boondocks, thumping across rickety wooden bridges that could’ve been thrown down around the Civil War. On either side of busted up two-lane blacktop were overgrown fields and hills dense with maples and poplar. Scotch broom reared on lean stalks, fire-yellow heads lolling hungrily. Scotch broom was Washington’s rebuttal to kudzu. It was quietly everywhere, feeding in the cracks of the earth.

Road signs floated nearly extinct; letters faded, or bullet-raddled, dimmed by pollen and sap. Occasionally, dirt tracks cut through high grass to

farmhouses. Cars passed us head-on, but not often, and usually local rigs—camouflage-green flatbeds with winches and trailers, two-tone pickups, decrepit jeeps. Nothing with out-of-state plates. I started thinking we'd missed a turn somewhere along the line. Not that I would've broached the subject. By then I'd learned to keep my mouth shut and let nature take its course.

"Do you even know where the hell they are?" Hart said. Hart was sour about the battle royal at the wharf. He figured it would give the bean counters an excuse to waffle about the payout for Piers' capture. I suspected he was correct.

"The Mima Mounds?"

"Yeah."

"Nope." Cruz rolled down the window, squirted Beech Nut over his shoulder, contributing another racing streak to the paint job. He twisted the radio dial and conjured Johnny Cash confessing that he'd "shot a man in Reno just to watch him die."

"Real man'd swallow," Hart said. "Like Josey Wales."

My cell beeped and I didn't catch Cruz's rejoinder. It was Carly. She'd seen the bust on the news and was worried, had been trying to reach me. The report mentioned shots fired and a wounded person, and I said yeah, one of our guys got clipped in the ankle, but he was okay, I was okay and the whole thing was over. We'd bagged the bad guy and all was right with the world. I promised to be home in a couple of days and told her to say hi to her mom. A wave of static drowned the connection.

I hadn't mentioned that the Canadians contemplated jailing us for various legal infractions and inciting mayhem. Her mother's blood pressure was already sky-high over what Sylvia called my "midlife adventure." Hard to blame her—it was my youthful "adventures" that set the torch to our unhappy marriage.

What Sylvia didn't know, couldn't know, because I lacked the grit to bare my soul at this late stage of our separation, was during the fifteen-martini lunch meeting with Hart, he'd showed me a few pictures to seal the deal. A roster of smiling teenage girls that could've been Carly's schoolmates. Hart explained in graphic detail what the bad man liked to do to these kids. Right

there it became less of an adventure and more of a mini-crusade. I'd been an absentee father for fifteen years. Here was my chance to play Lancelot.

Cruz said he was hungry enough to eat the ass-end of a rhino and Hart said stop and buy breakfast at the greasy spoon coming up on the left, materializing as if by sorcery, so they pulled in and parked alongside a rusted-out Pontiac on blocks. Hart remembered to open the door for me that time. One glimpse of the diner's filthy windows and the coils of dogshit sprinkled across the unpaved lot convinced me I wasn't exactly keen on going in for the special.

But I did.

The place was stamped 1950s from the long counter with a row of shiny black swivel stools and the too-small window booths, dingy Formica peeling at the edges of the tables, to the bubble-screen TV wedged high up in a corner alcove. The TV was flickering with grainy black-and-white images of a talk show I didn't recognize and couldn't hear because the volume was turned way down. Mercifully I didn't see myself during the commercials.

I slouched at the counter and waited for the waitress to notice me. Took a while—she was busy flirting with Hart and Cruz, who'd squeezed themselves into a booth, and of course they wasted no time in regaling her with their latest exploits as hardcase bounty hunters. By now it was purely mechanical; rote bravado. They were pale as sheets and running on fumes of adrenaline and junk. Oh, how I dreaded the next twenty-four to thirty-six hours.

Their story was edited for heroic effect. My private version played a little differently.

We finally caught the desperado and his best girl in the Maple Leaf Country. After a bit of "slap and tickle," as Hart put it, we handed the miscreants over to the Canadians, more or less intact. Well, the Canadians more or less took possession of the pair.

The bad man was named Russell Piers, a convicted rapist and kidnaper who'd cut a nasty swath across the great Pacific Northwest and British Columbia. The girl was Penny Aldon, a runaway, an orphan, the details varied, but she wasn't important, didn't even drive; was along for the thrill,

according to the reports. They fled to a river town, were loitering wharf-side, munching on a fish basket from one of six jillion Vietnamese vendors when the team descended.

Piers proved something of a Boy Scout—always prepared. He yanked a pistol from his waistband and started blazing, but one of him versus six of us only works in the movies and he went down under a swarm of blackjacks, Tasers and fists. I ran the hand-cam, got the whole jittering mess on film.

The film.

That was on my mind, sneaking around my subconscious like a night prowler. There was a moment during the scrum when a shiver of light distorted the scene, or I had a near-fainting spell, or who knows. The men on the sidewalk snapped and snarled, hyenas bringing down a wounded lion. Foam spattered the lens. I swayed, almost tumbled amid the violence. And Piers looked directly at me. Grinned at me. A big dude, even bigger than the troglodytes clinging to him, he had Cruz in a headlock, was ready to crush bones, to ravage flesh, to feast. A beast all right, with long, greasy hair, powerful hands scarred by prison tattoos, gold in his teeth. Inhuman, definitely. He wasn't a lion, though. I didn't know what kingdom he belonged to.

Somebody cold-cocked Piers behind the ear and he switched off, slumped like a mannequin that'd been bowled over by the holiday stampede.

Flutter, flutter and all was right with the world, relatively speaking. Except my bones ached and I was experiencing a not-so-mild wave of paranoia that hung on for hours. Never completely dissipated, even here in the sticks at a godforsaken hole-in-the-wall while my associates preened for an audience of one.

Cruz and Hart had starred on *Cops* and *America's Most Wanted;* they were celebrity experts. Too loud, the three of them honking and squawking, especially my ex-brother-in-law. Hart resembled a hog that decided to put on a dirty shirt and steel toe boots and go on its hind legs. Him being high as a kite wasn't helping. Sylvia tried to warn me; she'd known what her brother was about since they were kids knocking around on the wrong side of Des Moines.

I didn't listen. "*C'mon, Sylvie, there's a book in this. Hell, a Movie of the Week!"* Hart was on the inside of a rather seamy yet wholly marketable industry. He had a friend who had a friend who had a general idea where Mad Dog Piers was running. Money in the bank. See you in a few weeks, hold my calls.

"Watcha want, hon?" The waitress, a strapping lady with a tag spelling Victoria, poured translucent coffee into a cup that suggested the dishwasher wasn't quite up to snuff. Like all pro waitresses she pulled off this trick without looking away from my face. "I know you?" And when I politely smiled and reached for the sugar, she kept coming, frowning now as her brain began to labor. "You somebody? An actor or somethin'?"

I shrugged in defeat. "Uh, yeah. I was in a couple TV movies. Small roles. Long time ago."

Her face animated, a craggy talking tree. "Hey! You were on that comedy, one with the blind guy and his seein' eye dog. Only the guy was a con man or somethin', wasn't really blind and his dog was an alien or somethin', a robot, don't recall. Yeah, I remember you. What happened to that show?"

"Cancelled." I glanced longingly through the screen door to our ugly Chevy.

"Ray does shampoo ads," Hart said. He said something to Cruz and they cracked up.

"Milk of magnesia!" Cruz said. "And 'If you suffer from erectile dysfunction, now there's an answer!'" He delivered the last in a passable radio announcer's voice, although I'd heard him do better. He was hoarse.

The sun went behind a cloud, but Victoria still wanted my autograph, just in case I made a comeback, or got killed in a sensational fashion and then my signature would be worth something. She even dragged Sven the cook out to shake my hand and he did it with the dedication of a zombie following its mistress' instructions before shambling back to whip up eggs and hash for my comrades.

The coffee tasted like bleach.

The talk show ended and the next program opened with a still shot of a field covered by mossy hummocks and blackberry thickets. The black-and-

white imagery threw me. For a moment I didn't recognize the car parked between mounds. Our boxy Chevy with the driver-side door hanging ajar, mud-encrusted plates, taillights blinking SOS.

A gray hand reached from inside, slammed the door. A hand? Or something like a hand? A B-movie prosthesis? Too blurry, too fast to be certain.

Victoria changed the channel to All My Children.

3

Hart drove.

Cruz navigated. He tilted a road map, trying to follow the dots and dashes. Victoria had drawled a convoluted set of directions to the Mima Mounds, a one-star tourist attraction about thirty miles over. Cruise on through Poger Rock and head west. Real easy drive if you took the local shortcuts and suchlike.

Not an unreasonable detour; I-5 wasn't far from the site—we could do the tourist bit and still make the Portland night scene. That was Cruz's sales pitch. Kind of funny, really. I wondered at the man's sudden fixation on geological phenomena. He was a NASCAR and *Soldier of Fortune* magazine type personality. Hart fit the profile too, for that matter. Damned world was turning upside down.

It was getting hot. Cracks in the windshield dazzled and danced.

The boys debated cattle mutilations and the inarguable complicity of the Federal government regarding the Grey Question and how the moon landing was fake and remember that flick from the 1970s, *Capricorn One*, goddamned if O. J. wasn't one of the astronauts. Freakin' hilarious.

I unpacked the camera, thumbed the playback button, and relived the Donkey Creek fracas. Penny said to me, "*Reduviidae*—any of a species of large insects that feed on the blood of prey insects and some mammals. They are considered extremely beneficial by agricultural professionals." Her voice was made of tin and lagged behind her lip movements, like a badly dubbed foreign film. She stood on the periphery of the action, scrawny fingers pleating the wispy fabric of a blue sundress. She was smiling. "The indices of primate emotional thresholds indicate the [*click*-

click] process is traumatic. However, point oh-two percent vertebrae harvest corresponds to non-[*click-click*] purposes. As an X haplotype you are a primary source of [*click-click*]. Lucky you!”

“Jesus!” I muttered, and dropped the camera on the seat. *Are you talkin’ to me?* I stared at too many trees while Robert De Niro did his *Taxi Driver* schtick as a low frequency monologue in the corner of my mind. Unlike De Niro, I’d never carried a gun. The guys wouldn’t even loan me a Taser.

“What?” Cruz said in a tone that suggested he’d almost jumped out of his skin. He glared through the partition, olive features drained to ash. Giant drops of sweat sparkled and dripped from his broad cheeks. The light wrapped his skull, halo of an angry saint. Withdrawal’s something fierce, I decided.

I shook my head, waited for the magnifying glass of his displeasure to swing back to the road map. When it was safe I hit the playback button. Same scene on the view panel. This time when Penny entered the frame she pointed at me and intoned in a robust, Slavic accent, “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious is Latin for a death god of a primitive Mediterranean culture. Their civilization was buried in mudslides caused by unusual seismic activity. If you say it loud enough—” I hit the kill button. My stomach roiled with rancid coffee and incipient motion-sickness.

Third time’s a charm, right? I played it back again. The entire sequence was erased. Nothing but deep-space black with jags of silvery light at the edges. In the middle, skimming by so swiftly I had to freeze things to get a clear image, was Piers with his lips nuzzling Cruz’s ear, and Cruz’s face was corpse-slack. And for an instant, a microsecond, the face was Hart’s too; one of those three-dee poster illusions where the object changes depending on the angle. Then, more nothingness, and an odd feedback noise that faded in and out, like Gregorian monks chanting a litany in reverse.

Okay. ABC time.

I’d reviewed the footage shortly after the initial capture in Canada. There was nothing unusual about it. We spent a few hours at the police station answering a series of polite yet penetrating questions. I assumed our cameras would be confiscated, but the inspector simply examined our equipment in the presence of a couple suits from a legal office. Eventually

the inspector handed everything back with a stern admonishment to leave dangerous criminals to the authorities. Amen to that.

Had a cop tampered with the camera, doctored it in some way? I wasn't a filmmaker, didn't know much more than point and shoot and change the batteries when the little red light started blinking. So, yeah, Horatio, it was possible someone had screwed with the recording. Was that likely? The answer was no—not unless they'd also managed to monkey with the television at the diner. More likely one of my associates had spiked the coffee with a miracle agent and I was hallucinating. Seemed out of character for those greedy bastards, even for the sake of a practical joke on their third wheel—dope was expensive and it wasn't like we were expecting a big payday.

The remaining options weren't very appealing.

My cell whined, a dentist's drill in my shirt pocket. It was Rob Fries from his patio office in Gardena. Rob was tall, bulky, pink on top and garbed according to his impression of what Miami vice cops might've worn in a bygone era, such as the '80s. Rob also had the notion he was my agent despite the fact I'd fired him ten years ago after he handed me one too many scripts for laxative testimonials. I almost broke into tears when I heard his voice on the buzzing line. "Man, am I glad you called!" I said loudly enough to elicit another scowl from Cruz.

"*Hola, compadre.* What a splash y'all made on page 16. *'American Yahoos Run Amok!'* goes the headline, which is a quote of the Calgary rag. Too bad the stupid bastards let our birds fly the coop. Woulda been better press if they fried 'em. Well, they don't have the death penalty, but you get the point. Even so, I see a major motion picture deal in the works. *Mucho dinero,* Ray, buddy!"

"Fly the coop? What are you talking about?"

"Uh, you haven't heard? Piers and the broad walked. Hell, they probably beat you outta town."

"You better fill me in." Indigestion was eating the lining of my esophagus.

"Real weird story. Some schmuck from Central Casting accidentally turned 'em loose. The paperwork got misfiled or somesuch bullshit. The muckety-mucks are p.o.'d. Blows your mind, don't it?"

“Right,” I said in my actor’s tone. I fell back on this when my mind was in neutral but etiquette dictated a polite response. Up front, Cruz and Hart were bickering, hadn’t caught my exclamation. No way was I going to illuminate them regarding this development—Christ, they’d almost certainly consider pulling a U-turn and speeding back to Canada. The home office would be calling any second now to relay the news; probably had been trying to get through for hours—Hart hated phones, usually kept his stashed in the glovebox.

There was a burst of chittery static. “—returning your call. Keep getting the answering service. You won’t believe it—I was having lunch with this chick used to be one of Johnny Carson’s secretaries, yeah? And she said her best friend is shacking with an exec who just frickin’ adored you in *Clancy & Spot*. Frickin’ adored you! I told my gal pal to pass the word you were riding along on this bounty hunter gig, see what shakes loose.”

“Oh, thanks, Rob. Which exec?”

“Lemmesee—uh, Harry Buford. Remember him? He floated deals for the *Alpha Team,* some other stuff. Nice as hell. Frickin’ adores you, buddy.”

“Harry Buford? Looks like the Elephant Man’s older, fatter brother, loves pastels and lives in Mexico half the year because he’s fond of underage Chicano girls? Did an exposé piece on the evils of Hollywood, got himself blackballed? That the guy?”

“Well, yeah. But he’s still got an ear to the ground. And he frickin’—”

“Adores me. Got it. Tell your girlfriend we’ll all do lunch, or whatever.”

“Anywho, how you faring with the gorillas?”

“Um, great. We’re on our way to see the Mima Mounds.”

“What? You on a nature study?”

“Cruz’s idea.”

“The Mima Mounds. Wow. Never heard of them. Burial grounds, huh?”

“Earth heaves, I guess. They’ve got them all over the world—Norway, South America, Eastern Washington—I don’t know where all. I lost the brochure.”

“Cool.” The silence hung for a long moment. “Your buddies wanna see some, whatchyacallem—?”

“Glacial deposits.”

“They wanna look at some rocks instead of hitting a strip club? No bullshit?”

“Um, yeah.”

It was easy to imagine Rob frowning at his flip-flops propped on the patio table while he stirred the ice in his rum and Coke and tried to do the math. “Have a swell time, then.”

“You do me a favor?”

“Yo, bro’. Hit me.”

“Go on the Net and look up ‘X haplotype.’ Do it right now, if you’ve got a minute.”

“X-whatsis?”

I spelled it and said, “Call me back, okay? If I’m out of area, leave a message with the details.”

“Be happy to.” There was a pause as he scratched pen to pad. “Some kinda new meds, or what?”

“Or what, I think.”

“Uh-huh. Well, I’m just happy the Canucks didn’t make you an honorary citizen, eh. I’m dying to hear the scoop.”

“I’m dying to dish it. I’m losing my signal, gotta sign off.”

He said not to worry, bro’, and we disconnected. I worried anyway.

4

Sure enough, Hart’s phone rang a bit later and he exploded in a stream of repetitious profanity and dented the dash with his ham hock of a fist. He was still bubbling when we pulled into Poger Rock for gas and fresh directions. Cruz, on the other hand, accepted the news of Russell Piers’ “early parole” with a Zen detachment demonstrably contrary to his nature.

“Screw it. Let’s drink,” was his official comment.

Poger Rock was sunk in a hollow about fifteen miles south of the state capitol in Olympia. It wasn't impressive—a dozen or so antiquated buildings moldering along the banks of a shallow creek posted with no shooting signs. Everything was peeling, rusting or collapsing toward the center of the Earth. Only the elementary school loomed incongruously—a utopian brick and tile structure set back and slightly elevated, fresh paint glowing through the alders and dogwoods. Aliens might have landed and dedicated a monument.

Cruz filled up at a mom-and-pop gas station with the prehistoric pumps that took an eon to dribble forth their fuel. I bought some jerky and a carton of milk with a past-due expiration date to soothe my churning guts. The lady behind the counter had yellowish hair and wore a button with a fuzzy picture of a toddler in a bib. She smiled nervously as she punched keys and furiously smoked a Pall Mall. Didn't recognize me, thank God.

Cruz pushed through the door, setting off the ding-dong alarm. His gaze jumped all over the place and his chambray shirt was molded to his chest as if he'd been doused with a water hose. He crowded past me, trailing the odor of armpit funk and cheap cologne, grunted at the cashier and shoved his credit card across the counter.

I raised my hand to block the sun when I stepped outside. Hart was leaning on the hood. "We're gonna mosey over to the bar for a couple brewskis." He coughed his smoker's cough, spat in the gravel near a broken jar of marmalade. Bees darted among the wreckage.

"What about the Mima Mounds?"

"They ain't goin' anywhere. 'Sides, it ain't time, yet."

"Time?"

Hart's ferret-pink eyes narrowed and he smiled slightly. He finished his cigarette and lighted another from the smoldering butt. "Cruz says it ain't."

"Well, what does that mean? It 'ain't time'?"

"I dunno, Ray-bo. I dunno fuckall. Why'nchya ask Cruz?"

"Okay." I took a long pull of tepid milk while I considered the latest developments in what was becoming the most bizarre road trip of my life. "How are you feeling?"

“Groovy.”

“You look like hell.” I could still talk to him, after a fashion, when he was separated from Cruz. And I lied, “Sylvia’s worried.”

“What’s she worried about?”

I shrugged, let it hang. Impossible to read his face, his swollen eyes. In truth, I wasn’t sure I completely recognized him, this wasted hulk swaying against the car, features glazed into gargoyle contortions.

Hart nodded wisely, suddenly illuminated regarding a great and abiding mystery of the universe. His smile returned.

I glanced back, saw Cruz’s murky shadow drifting in the station window.

“Man, what are we doing out here? We could be in Portland by three.” What I wanted to say was, let’s jump in the car and shag ass for California. Leave Cruz in the middle of the parking lot holding his pecker and swearing eternal vengeance for all I cared.

“Anxious to get going on your book, huh?”

“If there’s a book. I’m not much of a writer. I don’t even know if we’ll get a movie out of this mess.”

“Ain’t much of an actor, either.” He laughed and slapped my shoulder with an iron paw to show he was just kidding. “Hey, lemme tell’ya. Did’ya know Cruz studied geology at UCLA? He did. Real knowledgeable about glaciers an’ rocks. All that good shit. Thought he was gonna work for the oil companies up in Alaska. Make some fat stacks. Ah, but you know how it goes, doncha, Ray-bo?”

“He graduated UCLA?” I tried not to sound astonished. It had been the University of Washington for me. The home of medicine, which wasn’t my specialty, according to the proctors. Political science and drama were the last exits.

“Football scholarship. Hard hittin’ safety with a nasty attitude. They fuckin’ grow on trees in the ghetto.”

That explained some things. I was inexplicably relieved.

Cruz emerged, cutting a plug of tobacco with his pocket knife. “C’mon, H. I’m parched.” And precisely as a cowboy would unhitch his horse to ride

across the street, he fired the engine and rumbled the one-quarter block to Moony's Tavern and parked in a diagonal slot between a hay truck and a station wagon plastered with anti-Democrat, pro-gun bumper stickers.

Hart asked if I planned on joining them and I replied maybe in a while, I wanted to stretch my legs. The idea of entering that sweltering cavern and bellying up to the bar with the lowlife regulars and mine own dear chums made my stomach even more unhappy.

I grabbed my valise from the car and started walking. I walked along the street, past a row of dented mailboxes, rust-red flags erect; an outboard motor repair shop with a dusty police cruiser in front; the Poger Rock Grange, which appeared abandoned because its windows were boarded and where they weren't, kids had broken them with rocks and bottles, and maybe the same kids had drawn 666 and other satanic symbols on the whitewashed planks, or maybe real live Satanists did the deed; Bob's Liquor Mart, which was a corrugated shed with bars on the tiny windows; the Laundromat, full of tired women in oversized tee-shirts, and screeching, dirty-faced kids racing among the machinery while an A.M. radio broadcast a Rush Limbaugh rerun; and a trailer loaded with half-rotted firewood for 75 bucks! I finally sat on a rickety bench under some trees near the lone stoplight, close enough to hear it clunk through its cycle.

I drew a manila envelope from the valise, spread sloppy typed police reports and disjointed photographs beside me. The breeze stirred and I used a rock for a paper weight.

A whole slew of the pictures featured Russell Piers in various poses, mostly mug shots, although a few had been snapped during more pleasant times. There was even one of him and a younger brother standing in front of the Space Needle. The remaining photos were of Piers' latest girlfriend—Penny Aldon, the girl from Allen Town. Skinny, pimply, mouthful of braces. A flower child with a suitably vacuous smirk.

Something cold and nasty turned over in me as I studied the haphazard data, the disheveled photo collection. I felt the pattern, unwholesome as damp cobwebs against my skin. Felt it, yet couldn't put a name to it, couldn't put my finger on it and my heart began pumping dangerously and I looked away, thought of Carly instead, and how I'd forgotten to call her on

her seventh birthday because I was in Spain with some friends at a Lipizzaner exhibition. Except, I hadn't forgotten, I was wired for sound from a snort of primo Colombian blow and the thought of dialing that long string of international numbers was too much for my circuits.

Ancient history, as they say. Those days of fast-living and superstar dreams belonged to another man, and he was welcome to them.

Waiting for cars to drive past so I could count them, I had an epiphany. I realized the shabby buildings were cardboard and the people milling here and there at opportune junctures were macaroni and glue. Dull blue construction paper sky and cotton ball clouds. And I wasn't really who I thought of myself as—I was an ant left over from a picnic raid, awaiting some petulant child-god to put his boot down on my pathetic diorama existence.

My cell rang and an iceberg calved in my chest.

"Hey, Ray, you got any Indian in ya?" Rob asked.

I mulled that as a brand new Cadillac convertible paused at the light. A pair of yuppie tourists mildly argued about directions—a man behind the wheel in stylish wraparound shades and a polo shirt, and a woman wearing a floppy, wide-brimmed hat like the Queen Mum favored. They pretended not to notice me. The woman pointed right and they went right, leisurely, up the hill and beyond. "Comanche," I said. Next was a shiny green van loaded with Asian kids. Sign on the door said the evergreen state college. It turned right and so did the one that came after. "About one thirty-second. Am I eligible for some reparation money? Did I inherit a casino?"

"Where the hell did the Comanche sneak in?"

"Great-grandma. Tough old bird. Didn't like me much. Sent me a straight razor for Christmas. I was nine."

Rob laughed. "Cra-zee. I did a search and came up with a bunch of listings for genetic research. Lemme check this…" He shuffled paper close to the receiver, cleared his throat. "Turns out this X haplogroup has to do with mitochondrial DNA, genes passed down on the maternal side—and an X haplogroup is a specific subdivision or cluster. The university wags are tryin' to use female lineage to trace tribal migrations and so forth. Something like three percent of Native Americans, Europeans and Basque

belong to the X-group. Least, according to the stuff I thought looked reputable. Says here there's lots of controversy about its significance. Usual academic crap. Whatch you were after?"

"I don't know. Thanks, though."

"You okay, bud? You sound kinda odd."

"Shucks, Rob, I've been trapped in a car with two redneck psychos for weeks. Might be getting to me, I'll admit."

"Whoa, sorry. Sylvia called and started going on—"

"Everything's hunky-dory, all right?"

"Cool, bro." Rob's tone said nothing was truly cool, but he wasn't in any position to press the issue. There'd be a serious Q&A when I returned, no doubt about it.

Cruz's dad was Basque, wasn't he? Hart was definitely of good, solid German stock only a couple generations removed from the motherland.

Stop me if you've heard this one—a Spaniard, a German and a Comanche walk into a bar—

After we said goodbye, I dialed my ex and got her machine, caught myself and hung up as it was purring. It occurred to me then, what the pattern was, and I stared dumbly down at the fractured portraits of Penny and Piers as their faces were dappled by sunlight falling through a maze of leaves.

I laughed, bitter.

How in God's name had they ever fooled us into thinking they were people at all? The only things missing from this farce were strings and zippers, a boom mike.

I stuffed the photos and the reports into the valise, stood in the weeds at the edge of the asphalt. My blood still pulsed erratically. Shadows began to crawl deep and blue between the buildings and the trees and in the wake of low-gliding cumulus clouds. Moony's Tavern waited, back there in the golden dust, and Cruz's Chevy before it, stolid as a coffin on the altar.

Something was happening, wasn't it? This thing that was happening, had been happening, could it follow me home if I cut and ran? Would it follow me to Sylvia and Carly?

No way to be certain, no way to tell if I had simply fallen off my rocker—maybe the heat had cooked my brain, maybe I was having a long-overdue nervous breakdown. Maybe, shit. The sinister shape of the world contracted around me, gleamed like the curves of a great killing jar. I heard the lid screwing tight in the endless ultraviolet collisions, the white drone of insects.

I turned right and walked up the hill.

5

About two hours later, a guy in a vintage farm truck stopped. The truck had cruised by me twice, once going toward town, then on the way back. And here it was again. I hesitated; nobody braked for hitchhikers unless the hitcher was a babe in tight jeans.

I thought of Piers and Penny, their expressions in the video, drinking us with their smiling mouths, marking us. And if that was true, we'd been weighed, measured and marked, what was the implication? Piers and Penny were two from among a swarm. Was it open season?

The driver studied me with unsettling intensity, his beady eyes obscured by thick, black-rimmed glasses. He beckoned.

My legs were tired already and the back of my neck itched with sunburn. Also, what did it matter anyway? If I were doing anything besides playing out the hand, I would've gone into Olympia and caught a southbound Greyhound. I climbed aboard.

George was a retired civil engineer. Looked the part—crewcut, angular face like a piece of rock, wore a dress shirt with a row of clipped pens and a tie flung over his shoulder, and polyester slacks. He kept NPR on the radio at a mumble. Gripped the wheel with both gnarled hands.

He seemed familiar—a figure dredged from memories of scientists and engineers of my grandfather's generation. He could've *been* my grandfather.

George asked me where I was headed. I said Los Angeles and he gave me a glance that said LA was in the opposite direction. I told him I wanted to visit the Mima Mounds—since I was in the neighborhood.

There was a heavy silence. A vast and unfathomable pressure built in the cab. At last George said, “Why, they’re only a couple miles farther on. Do you know anything about them?”

I admitted that I didn’t and he said he figured as much. He told me the mounds were declared a national monument back in the ’60s; the subject of scholarly debate and wildly inaccurate hypotheses. He hoped I wouldn’t be disappointed—they weren’t glamorous compared to real natural wonders such as Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon or the California Redwoods. The preserve was on the order of five hundred acres, but that was nothing. The Mounds had stretched for miles and miles in the old days. The land grabs of the 1890s reduced the phenomenon to a pocket, surrounded it with rundown farms, pastures and cows. The ruins of America’s agrarian era.

I said that it would be impossible to disappoint me.

George turned at a wooden marker with a faded white arrow. A nicely paved single lane wound through temperate rain forest for a mile and looped into a parking lot occupied by the Evergreen vans and a few other vehicles. There was a fence with a gate and beyond that, the vague border of a clearing. Official bulletins were posted every six feet, prohibiting dogs, alcohol and firearms.

“Sure you want me to leave you here?”

“I’ll be fine.”

George rustled, his clothes chitin sloughing. “X marks the spot.”

I didn’t regard him, my hand frozen on the door handle, more than slightly afraid the door wouldn’t open. Time slowed, got stuck in molasses. “I know a secret, George.”

“What kind of secret?” George said, too close, as if he’d leaned in tight.

The hairs stiffened on the nape of my neck. I swallowed and closed my eyes. “I saw a picture in a biology textbook. There was this bug, looked exactly like a piece of bark, and it was barely touching a beetle with its nose. The one that resembled bark was what entomologists call an assassin bug and it was draining the beetle dry. Know how? It poked the beetle with a razor-sharp beak thingy—”

“A rostrum, you mean.”

“Exactly. A rostrum, or a proboscis, depending on the species. Then the assassin bug injected digestive fluids, think hydrochloric acid, and sucked the beetle’s insides out.”

“How lovely,” George said.

“No struggle, no fuss, just a couple bugs sitting on a branch. So I’m staring at this book and thinking the only reason the beetle got caught was because it fell for the old piece of bark trick, and then I realized that’s how lots of predatory bugs operate. They camouflage themselves and sneak up on hapless critters to do their thing.”

“Isn’t that the way of the universe?”

“And I wondered if that theory only applied to insects.”

“What do you suppose?”

“I suspect that theory applies to everything.”

Zilch from George. Not even the rasp of his breath.

“Bye, George. Thanks for the ride.” I pushed hard to open the door and jumped down; moved away without risking a backward glance. My knees were unsteady. After I passed through the gate and approached a bend in the path, I finally had the nerve to check the parking lot. George’s truck was gone.

I kept going, almost falling forward.

The trees thinned to reveal the humpbacked plain from the TV picture. Nearby was a concrete bunker shaped like a squat mushroom—a park information kiosk and observation post. It was papered with articles and diagrams under plexiglass. Throngs of brightly clad Asian kids buzzed around the kiosk, laughing over the wrinkled flyers, pointing cameras and chattering enthusiastically. A shaggy guy in a hemp sweater, presumably the professor, lectured a couple of wind-burned ladies who obviously ran marathons in their spare time. The ladies were enthralled.

I mounted the stairs to the observation platform and scanned the environs. As George predicted, the view wasn’t inspiring. The mounds spread beneath my vantage, none greater than five or six feet in height and largely engulfed in blackberry brambles. Collectively, the hillocks formed a dewdrop hemmed by mixed forest, and toward the narrowing end, a

dilapidated trailer court, its structures rendered toys by perspective. The paved footpath coiled unto obscurity.

A radio-controlled airplane whirred in the trailer court airspace. The plane's engine throbbed, a shrill metronome. I squinted against the glare, couldn't discern the operator. My skull ached. I slumped, hugged the valise to my chest, pressed my cheek against damp concrete, and drowsed. Shoes scraped along the platform. Voices occasionally floated by. Nobody challenged me, my derelict posture. I hadn't thought they would. Who'd dare disturb the wildlife in this remote enclave?

My sluggish daydreams were phantoms of the field, negatives of its buckled hide and stealthy plants, and the whispered words *Eastern Washington, South America, Norway*. Scientists might speculate about the geological method of the mounds' creation until doomsday. I knew this place and its sisters were unnatural as monoliths hacked from rude stone by primitive hands and stacked like so many dominos in the uninhabited spaces of the globe. What were they? Breeding grounds, feeding grounds, shrines? Or something utterly alien, something utterly incomprehensible to match the blighted fascination that dragged me ever closer and consumed my will to flee.

Hart's call yanked me from the doldrums. He was drunk. "You shoulda stuck around, Ray-bo. We been huntin' everywhere for you. Cruz ain't in a nice mood." The connection was weak, a transmission from the dark side of Pluto. Batteries were dying.

"Where are you?" I rubbed my gummy eyes and stood.

"We're at the goddamned Mounds. Where are *you?"*

I spied a tiny glint of moving metal. The Chevy rolled across the way where the road and the mobile homes intersected. I smiled—Cruz hadn't been looking for me; he'd been trolling around on the wrong side of the park, frustrated because he'd missed the entrance. As I watched, the car slowed and idled in the middle of the road. "I'm here."

The cell phone began to click like a Geiger counter that'd hit the mother lode. Bits of fiddle music pierced the garble.

The car jolted from a savage tromp on the gas and listed ditchward. It accelerated, jounced and bounded into the field, described a haphazard arc

in my direction. I had a momentary terror that they'd seen me atop the tower, were coming for me, were planning some unhinged brand of retribution. But no, the distance was too great. I was no more than a speck, if I was anything. Soon, the car lurched behind the slope of intervening hillocks and didn't emerge.

"Hart, are you there?"

The clicking intensified and abruptly chopped off, replaced by smooth, bottomless static. Deep sea squeals and warbles began to filter through. Bees humming. A castrati choir on a gramophone. Giggling. Someone, perhaps Cruz, whispering a Latin prayer. I was grateful when the phone made an electronic protest and expired. I hurled it over the side.

The college crowd had disappeared. Gone too, the professor and his admirers. I might've joined the migration if I hadn't spotted the cab of George's truck mostly hidden by a tree. It was the only rig in the parking lot. I couldn't tell if anyone was behind the wheel.

The sun hung low and fat, reddening as it sank. The breeze had cooled. It plucked at my hair, dried my sweat, chilled me a little. I listened for the roar of the Chevy, buried to the axles in loose dirt, high-centered on a stump; or perhaps they'd abandoned the vehicle. Thus I strained to pick my companions from among the blackberry patches and softly undulating clumps of scotch broom which had invaded this place too.

Quiet.

I went down the stairs and let the path take me. I went as a man in a stupor, my muscles lethargic with dread. The lizard subprocessor in my brain urged me to sprint for the highway, to scuttle into a burrow. It possessed a hint of what waited over the hill, had possibly witnessed this melodrama many times before. I whistled a dirge through clenched teeth and the mounds closed ranks behind me.

Ahead, came the dull clank of a slamming door.

The car was stalled at the foot of a steep slope, its hood buried in a tangle of brush. The windows were dark as a muddy aquarium and festooned with fleshy creepers and algid scum.

I took root a few yards from the car, noting that the engine was dead, yet the vehicle rocked on its springs from some vigorous activity. A rhythmic motion that caused metal to complain. The brake lights stuttered.

Hart's doughy face materialized on the passenger side, bumped against the glass with the dispassion of a pale, exotic fish, and withdrew, descending into a marine trench. His forehead left a starry impact. Someone's palm smacked the rear window, hung there, fingers twitching.

I retreated. Ran, more like. I may have shrieked. Somewhere along the line the valise flew open and its contents spilled—a welter of files, the argyle socks Carly gave me for Father's Day, my toiletries. A handful of photographs pinwheeled in a gust. I dropped the bag. Ungainly, panicked, I didn't get far, tripped and collapsed as the sky blackened and a high-pitched keening erupted from several locations simultaneously. In moments all ambient light had been sucked away; I couldn't see the thorny bush gouging my neck as I wriggled for cover, couldn't make out my own hand before my eyes.

The keening ceased. Peculiar echoes bounced in its wake, gave me the absurd sensation of lying on a sound stage with the kliegs shut off. I received the impression of movement around my hunkered self, although I didn't hear footsteps. I shuddered, pressed my face deeper into musty soil. Ants investigated my pants cuffs.

Cruz called my name from the throat of a distant tunnel. I knew it wasn't him and kept silent. He cursed me and giggled the unpleasant giggle I'd heard on the phone. Hart tried to coax me out, but this imitation was even worse. They went down the entire list and despite everything I was tempted to answer when Carly began crying and hiccupping and begging me to help her, Daddy please, in a baby girl voice she hadn't owned for several years. I stuffed my fist in my mouth, held on while the chorus drifted here and there and eventually receded into the buzz and chirr of field life.

The sun flickered on and the world was restored piecemeal—one root, one stump, one hill at a time. My head swam; reminded me of waking from anesthesia.

Dusk was blooming when I crept from the bushes and tasted the air, cocked an ear for predators. The Chevy was there, shimmering in the twilight.

Motionless now.

I could've crouched in my blind forever, wild-eyed as a hare run to ground in a ruined shirt and piss-stained slacks. But it was getting cold and I was thirsty, so I slunk across the park at an angle that took me to the road near the trailer court. I went, casting glances over my shoulder for pursuit that never came.

6

I told a retiree sipping ice tea in a lawn chair that my car had broken down and he let me use his phone to call a taxi. If he witnessed Cruz crash the Chevy into the mounds, he wasn't saying. The police didn't show while I waited and that said enough about the situation.

The taxi driver was a stolid Samoan who proved not the least bit interested in my frightful appearance or talking. He drove way too fast for comfort, if I'd been in a rational frame of mind, and dropped me at the Greyhound depot in downtown Olympia.

I wandered inside past the ragtag gaggle of modern gypsies which inevitably haunted these terminals, studied the big board while the ticket agent pursed her lips in distaste. Her expression certified me as one of the unwashed mob.

I picked Seattle at random, bought a ticket. The ticket got me the key to the restroom, where I splashed my welted flesh, combed cat tails from my hair and looked almost human again. Almost. The fluorescent tube crackled and sizzled, threatened to plunge the crummy toilet into darkness, and in the discotheque flashes, my haggard face seemed strange.

The bus arrived an hour late and it was crammed. I shared a seat with a middle-aged woman wearing a shawl and scads of costume jewelry. Her ivory skin was hard and she smelled of chlorine. I didn't imagine she wanted to sit by me, judging from the flare of her nostrils, the crimp of her over-glossed mouth.

Soon the bus was chugging into the wasteland of night and the lights clicked off row by row as passengers succumbed to sleep. Except some guy

near the front who left his overhead lamp on to read, and me. I was too exhausted to close my eyes.

I surprised myself by crying.

And the woman surprised me again by murmuring, “Hush, hush, dear. Hush, hush.” She patted my trembling shoulder. Her hand lingered.

The Imago Sequence

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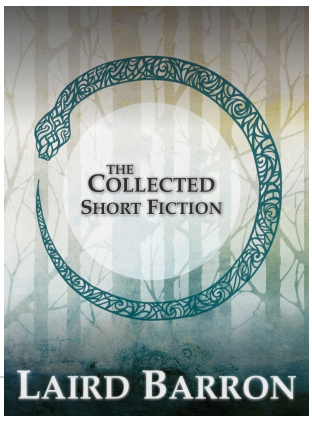


Imago. Imago. Imago.
—Wallace Stevens

1

Like the Shroud of Turin, the disfigured shape in the photograph was a face waiting to be born. An inhuman face, in this instance. The Devil, abstracted, or a black-mouthed sunflower arrested mid-bloom. Definitely an object to be regarded with morbid appreciation, and then followed by a double scotch to quash the heebie-jeebies.

I went to Jacob Wilson's Christmas party to see his uncle's last acquisition, one that old man Theodore hadn't stuck around to enjoy. A *natural Rorschach,* Jacob said of the photo. It had been hanging in the Seattle Art Museum for months, pending release at the end of its show. Jacob was feeling enigmatic when he called about the invitation three days before Christmas and would say no more. No need—the hook was set.

I hadn't talked to Jacob since the funeral. I almost skipped his party despite that guilt, aware of the kind of people who would attend. Whip-thin socialites with quick, sharp tongues, iron-haired lawyers from colonial families and sardonic literati dredged from resident theater groups. Sleek, wealthy and voracious; they inhabited spheres far removed from mine. As per custom, I would occupy the post of the educated savage in Jacob's court. An orangutan dressed for a calendar shoot, propped in the corner to brood artfully. Perhaps I could entertain them with my rough charm, my lowbrow anecdotes. It wasn't appealing. Nonetheless, I went because I

always went, and because Carol gave me her sweetest frown when I hesitated; the one that hinted of typhoons and earthquakes.

The ride from my loft in downtown Olympia served to prepare my game face. I took the 101 north, turned onto Delphi Road and followed it through the deep, dark Capitol Forest and up into the Black Hills. Carol chattered on her cell, ignoring me, so I drove too fast. I always drove too fast these days.

The party was at full steam as I rolled along the mansion's circle drive and angled my rusty, four-door Chrysler into a slot among the acres of Porsches, Jaguars and Mercedes. Teddy Wilson might've only been a couple of months in his grave, but Jacob was no neophyte host of galas. He attracted the cream, all right.

Bing Crosby and a big band were hitting their stride when the front doors gave way. A teenage hood in a spiffy white suit grabbed our coats. I automatically kept one hand over my wallet. The bluebloods congregated in a parlor dominated by a fiery synthetic tree. A slew of the doorman's white-tuxedoed brethren circulated with trays of champagne and hors d'oeuvres. The atmosphere was that of a cast party on the set of *Casablanca*. Jarring the illusion was Wayne Newton's body double slumped on the bench of the baby grand, his pinky ring winking against the keys. I didn't think he was playing; a haphazard pyramid of shot glasses teetered near his leg and he looked more or less dead.

Guests milled, mixing gleeful ennui with bad martinis. Many were sufficiently drunk to sand down the veneer of civility and start getting nasty. Jacob presided, half seas over, as the Cockney used to say, lolling before his subjects and sycophants in Byzantine splendor. I thought, *Good god, he's wearing a cape!* His attire was a silken clash of maroon and mustard, complete with ruffles, a V-neck shirt ripped from the back of a Portuguese corsair, billowing pantaloons and wooden sandals that hooked at the toe. A white and gold cape spread beneath his bulk, and he fanned himself with a tri-corner hat. Fortunately, he wasn't wearing the hat.

Carol glided off to mingle, stranding me without a backward glance. I tried not to take it personally. If not for a misfortune of birth, this could have been her tribe.

Meanwhile, I spotted the poster-sized photograph upon its easel, fixed in the center of the parlor. Heavy as a black hole, the photograph dragged me forward on wires. Shot on black and white, it detailed a slab of rock, which I assumed was subterranean. Lacking a broader frame of reference, it was impossible to know. The finer aspects of geology escaped me, but I was fascinated by the surreal quality of this glazed wall, its calcified ridges, webbed spirals and bubbles. The inkblot at its heart was humanoid, head twisted to regard the viewer. The ambient light had created a blur not unlike a halo, or horns, depending on the angle. This apish thing possessed a broad mouth slackened as an unequal ellipse. A horrible silhouette; lumpy, misshapen and dead for epochs. Hopefully dead. Other pockets of half-realized darkness orbited the formation; fragments splintered from the core. More cavemen, devils, or dragons.

Hosts occurred to me.

A chunky kid in a turtleneck said it actually resembled a monstrous jellyfish snared in flowstone, but was undoubtedly simple discoloration. Certainly not any figure—human or otherwise. He asked Jacob his opinion. Jacob squinted and declared he saw only the warp and woof of amber shaved bare and burned by a pop flash. Supposedly another guest had witnessed an image of Jesus on Golgotha. This might have been a joke; Jacob had demolished the contents of his late uncle’s liquor cabinet and was acting surly.

I seldom drank at Jacob’s cocktail socials, preferring to undertake such solemn duty in the privacy of my home. But I made a Christmas exception, and I paid. Tumblers began clicking in my head. A queasy jolt nearly loosened my grip on my drink, bringing sharper focus to the photograph and its spectral face in stone. The crowd shrank, shivered as dying leaves, became pictographs carved into a smoky cave wall.

A dung fire sputtered against the encroaching well of night, and farther along the cave wall, scored with its Paleolithic characters, a cleft sank into the humid earth. Flies buzzed, roaches scuttled. A reed pipe wheedled an almost familiar tune—

My gorge tasted alkaline; my knees buckled.

This moment of dislocation expanded and burst, revealing the parlor still full of low lamplight and cigarette smog, its mob of sullen revelers intact. Jacob sprawled on his leather sofa, regarding me. His expression instantly subsided into a mask of flabby diffidence. It happened so smoothly and I was so shaken I let it go. Carol didn't notice; she was curled up by the fireplace laughing too loudly with a guy in a Norwegian sweater. The roses in their cheeks were brick-red and the sweater guy kept slopping liquor on the rug when he gestured.

Jacob waved. "You look shitty, Marvin. Come on, I've got medicine in the study."

"And you look like the Sun King."

He laughed. "Seriously, there's some grass left. Or some Vicodin, if you prefer."

No way I was going to risk Jacob's weed if it had in any way influenced his fashion sense. On the other hand, Vicodin sounded too good to be true. "Thanks. My bones are giving me hell." The dull ache in my spine had sharpened to a railroad spike as it always did during the rainy season. After we had retreated to the library and poured fresh drinks, I leaned against a bookcase to support my back. "What's it called?"

He sloshed whiskey over yellow teeth. "*Parallax Alpha*. Part one of a trio entitled the *Imago Sequence*—if I could lay my hands on *Parallax Beta* and *Imago* I'd throw a *real* party." His voice reverberated in the rich, slurred tones of a professional speaker who'd shrugged off the worst body blows a bottle of malt scotch could offer.

"There are two others!"

"You like."

"Nope, I'm repulsed." I had gathered my nerves into one jangling bundle; sufficient to emote a semblance of calm.

"Yet fascinated." His left eyelid drooped in a wink. "Me too. I'd kill to see the rest. Each is a sister of this piece—subtle perspective variances, different fields of depth, but quite approximate."

"Who's got them—anybody I know?"

"*Parallax Beta* is on loan to a San Francisco gallery by the munificence of a collector named Anselm Thornton. A trust fund brat turned recluse. It's presumed he has *Imago*. Nobody is sure about that one, though. We'll get back to it in a minute."

"Jake—what do you see in that photo?"

"I'm not sure. A tech acquaintance of mine at UW analyzed it. 'Inconclusive,' she said. *Something's* there."

"Spill the tale."

"Heard of Maurice Ammon?"

I shook my head.

"He's obscure. The fellow was a photographer attached to the Royal University of London back in the '40s and '50s. He served as chief shutterbug for pissant expeditions in the West Indies and Africa. Competent work, though not Sotheby material. The old boy was a craftsman. He didn't pretend to be an artist."

"Except for the *Imago* series."

"Bingo. *Parallax Alpha*, for example, transcends journeyman photography, which is why Uncle Teddy was so, dare I say, obsessed." Jacob chortled, pressed the glass to his cheek. His giant, red-rimmed eye leered at me. "Cecil Eaton was the first to recognize what Ammon had accomplished. Eaton was a Texas oil baron and devoted chum of Ammon's. Like a few others, he suspected the photos were of a hominid. He purchased the series in '55. Apparently, misfortune befell him and his estate was auctioned. Since then the series has changed hands several times and gotten scattered from Hades to breakfast. Teddy located this piece last year at an exhibit in Seattle. The owner got committed to Grable and the family was eager to sell. Teddy caught it on the hop."

"Define obsession for me." I must've sounded hurt, being kept in the dark about one of Teddy's eccentric passions, of which he'd possessed legion, because Jacob looked slightly abashed.

"Sorry, Marvo. It wasn't a big deal—I never thought it was important, anyway. But… Teddy was on the hunt since 1987. He blew maybe a quarter

mil traveling around following rumors and whatnot. The pieces moved way too often. He said it was like trying to grab water."

"Anybody ever try to buy the whole enchilada?"

"The series has been fragmented since Ammon originally sold two to Eaton and kept the last for himself—incidentally, no one knows much about the final photograph, *Imago.* Ammon never showed it around and it didn't turn up in his effects."

"Where'd they come from?"

"There's the weird part. Ammon kept the photos' origin a secret. He refused to say where he took them, or what they represented."

"Okay. Maybe he was pumping up interest by working the element of mystery." I'd watched enough artists in action to harbor my share of cynicism.

Jacob let it go. "Our man Maurice was an odd duck. Consorted with shady folks, had peculiar habits. There's no telling where his mind was."

"Peculiar habits? Do tell."

"I don't know the details. He was smitten with primitive culture, especially obscure primitive religions—and most especially the holy pharmaceuticals that accompany certain rites." He feigned taking a deep drag from a nonexistent pipe.

"Sounds like a funky dude. He lived happily ever after?"

"Alas, he died in a plane crash in '57. Well, his plane disappeared over Nairobi. Same difference. Bigwigs from the university examined his journals, but the journals didn't shed any light." Jacob knocked back his drink and lowered his voice for dramatic effect. "Indeed, some of those scholars hinted that the journals were extremely cryptic. Gave them the willies, as the campfire tales go. I gather Ammon was doubtful of humanity's long term survival; didn't believe we were equipped to adapt with technological and sociological changes looming on the horizon. He admired reptiles and insects—had a real fixation on them.

"The series went into private-collector limbo before it was subjected to much scrutiny. Experts debunked the hominid notion. Ammon's

contemporaries suggested he was a misanthropic kook, that he created the illusion to perpetrate an intricate hoax."

Something in the way Jacob said this last part caused my ears to prick up. "The experts only satisfy four out of five customers," I said.

He studied his drink, smiled his dark smile. "Doubtless. However, several reputable anthropologists gave credence to its possible authenticity. They maintained official silence for fear of being ostracized by their peers, of being labeled crackpots. But if someone proved them correct…"

"The photos' value would soar. Their owner would be a celebrity, too, I suppose." Finally, Jacob's motives crystallized.

"Good god, yes! Imagine the scavenger hunt. Every swinging dick with a passport and a shovel would descend upon all the remote sites Ammon ever set foot. And let me say, he got around."

I sat back, calculating the angles through a thickening alcoholic haze. "Are the anthropologists alive; the guys who bought this theory?"

"I can beat that. Ammon kept an assistant, an American grad student. After Ammon died, the student faded into the woodwork. Guess who it turns out to be?—The hermit art collector in California. Anselm Thornton ditched the graduate program, jumped the counterculture wave in Cali—drove his upper-crust, Dixie-loving family nuts, too. If anybody knows the truth about the series I'm betting it's him."

"Thornton's a southern gentleman."

"He's of southern stock, anyhow. Texas Panhandle. His daddy was a cattle rancher."

"Longhorns?"

"Charbray."

"Ooh, classy." I crunched ice to distract myself from mounting tension in my back. "Think papa Thornton was thick with that Eaton guy? An oil baron and a cattle baron—real live American royalty. The wildcatter, a pal to the mysterious British photographer; the Duke, with a son as the photographer's protégé. Next we'll discover they're all Masons conspiring to hide the missing link. They aren't Masons, are they?"

“Money loves money. Maybe it’s relevant, maybe not. The relevant thing is Thornton Jr. may have information I desire.”

I didn’t need to ask where he had gathered this data. Chuck Shepherd was the Wilson clan’s pet investigator. He worked from an office in Seattle. Sober as a mortician, meticulous and smooth on the phone. I said, “Hermits aren’t chatty folk.”

“Enter Marvin Cortez, my favorite ambassador.” Jacob leaned close enough to club me with his whiskey breath and squeezed my shoulder. “Two things. I want the location of this hominid, if there is a hominid. There probably isn’t, but you know what I mean. Then, figure out if Thornton is connected to… the business with my uncle.”

I raised my brows. “Does Shep think so?”

“I don’t know what Shep thinks. I do know Teddy contacted Thornton. They briefly corresponded. A few weeks later, Teddy’s gone.”

“Damn, Jake, that’s a stretch—never mind. How’d they make contact?”

Jacob shrugged. “Teddy mentioned it in passing. I wasn’t taking notes.”

“Ever call Thornton yourself, do any follow up?”

“We searched Teddy’s papers, pulled his phone records. No number for Thornton, no physical address, except for this card—the Weston Gallery, which is the one that has *Parallax Beta*. The director blew me off—some chump named Renfro. Sounded like a nut job, actually. I wrote Thornton a letter around Thanksgiving, sent it care of the gallery. He hasn’t replied. I wanted the police to shake a few answers out of the gallery, but they gave me the runaround. Case closed, let’s get some doughnuts, boys!”

“Turn Shep loose. A pro like him will do this a lot faster.”

“Faster? I don’t give a damn about faster. I want answers. The kind of answers you get by asking questions with a lead pipe. That isn’t up Shep’s alley.”

I envisioned the investigator’s soft, pink hands. Banker’s hands. My own were broad and heavy, and hard as marble. Butcher’s hands.

Jacob said, “I’ll cover expenses. And that issue with King…”

“It’ll dry up and blow away?” Rudolph King was a contractor on the West Side; he moonlighted as a loan shark, ran a pool hall and several neat little rackets from the local hippie college. I occasionally collected for him. A job went sour; he reneged on our arrangement, so I shut his fingers in a filing cabinet—a bit rough, but there were proprietary interests at stake. Jacob crossed certain palms with silver, saved me from making a return appearance at Walla Walla. Previously, I did nine months there on a vehicular assault charge for running over a wise-mouth pimp named Leon Berens. Berens had been muscling in on the wrong territory—a deputy sheriff’s, in fact, which was the main reason I only did a short hitch. The kicker was, after he recovered, Berens landed the head bartender gig at the Happy Tiger, a prestigious lounge in the basement of the Sheraton. He was ecstatic because the Happy Tiger was in a prime spot three blocks from the Capitol Dome. Hustling a string of five-hundred-dollars-a-night call girls for the stuffed shirts was definitely a vertical career move. He fixed me up with dinner and drinks whenever I wandered in.

“Poof.”

Silence stretched between us. Jacob pretended to stare at his glass and I pretended to consider his proposal. We knew there was no escape clause in our contract. I owed him and the marker was on the table. I said, “I’ll make some calls, see if I can track him down. You still want me to visit him… well, we’ll talk again. All right?”

“Thanks, Marvin.”

“Also, I want to look at Teddy’s papers myself. I’ll swing by in a day or two.”

“No problem.”

We ambled back to the party. A five-piece band from the Capitol Theatre was gearing up for a set. I went to locate more scotch. When I returned, Jacob was surrounded by a school of liberal arts piranhas, the lot of them swimming in a pool of smoke from clove cigarettes.

I melted into the scenery and spent three hours nursing a bottle of Dewar’s, avoiding eye contact with anyone who looked ready for conversation. I tried not to sneak too many glances at the photograph. No need to have worried on that score; by then, everyone else had lost complete interest.

Around midnight Carol keeled over beside the artificial tree. The guy in the Norwegian sweater moved on to a blonde in a shiny dress. I packed Carol in the car and drove home, grateful to escape another Jacob Wilson Christmas party without rearranging somebody's face.

2

Nobody knew if Theodore Wilson was dead, it was simply the safe way to bet. One knife-bright October morning the Coast Guard had received a truncated distress signal from his yacht, *Pandora*, north of the San Juans. He'd been on a day trip to his lover's island home. Divers combed the area for two weeks before calling it quits. They found no wreckage, no body. The odds of a man surviving more than forty minutes in that frigid water were minimal, however. Teddy never slowed down to raise a family, so Jacob inherited a thirteen-million-dollar estate for Christmas. It should've been a nice present for me as well—I'd been Jake's asshole buddy since our time at State.

College with Jacob had been movie-of-the-week material—the blue-collar superjock meets the royal wastrel. Me on a full wrestling scholarship and Jacob starring as the fat rich boy who had discovered superior financial status did not always garner what he craved most—adulation. Thick as ticks, we shared a dorm, went on road trips to Vegas, spent holidays at the Wilson House. Eventually he convinced his globetrotting uncle to support my Olympic bid. It was a hard sell—the elder Wilson had no use for contemporary athletic competition. Descended from nineteenth century New England gentry, he favored the refined pursuits of amateur archeology, ancient philology and sailing—but young Jacob was glib and the deal was made. Never mind that I was a second-rate talent blown up on steroids and hype, or that two of my collegiate titles were fixed by thick-jowled Irishmen who drank boilermakers for breakfast and insisted wrestling was a pansy sport.

Teddy dropped me more than ten years ago. He lost a bucket of cash and a serious amount of face among his peers when I tanked in '90 before the Olympic Trials. The Ukrainian super heavyweight champion broke my back

in two places during an exhibition match. Sounded like an elephant stepping on a stick of wet kindling.

Bye, bye macho, patriotic career. Hello physician-prescribed dope, self-prescribed booze and a lifetime of migraines that would poleax a mule.

Really, it was a goddamned relief.

I got familiar with body casts, neck braces and pity. Lately, the bitter dregs of a savings account kept a roof over my head and steak in my belly. A piecemeal contract to unload trucks for a couple Thurston County museums satisfied a minor art fetish. Mama had majored in sculpture, got me hooked as a lad. Collecting debts for the local “moneylenders” was mainly a hobby —just like dear old pop before somebody capped him at a dogfight. I was a real Renaissance man.

I met Carol while I was politely leaning on her then boyfriend, a BMW salesman with a taste for long-shot ponies and hard luck basketball teams. Carol worked as a data specialist for the department of corrections. She found the whole failed-athlete turned arm-breaker routine erotic. What should’ve been a weekend fling developed into a bad habit that I hadn’t decided the best way to quit.

The day after the party I asked her what she thought of Jacob’s photograph. She was stepping out of the shower, dripping hair wrapped in a towel. “What photograph?” She asked.

I stared at her.

She didn’t smile, too busy searching for her earrings. Probably as hung-over as I was. “Oh, that piece of crap his uncle bought off that crazy bitch in Seattle. I didn’t like it. Piece of crap. Where are my goddamned earrings.”

“Did you even look at it?”

“Sure.”

“Notice anything unusual?”

“It was unusually crappy. Here we go.” She retrieved her earrings from the carpet near her discarded stockings. “Why, he try to sell it to you? For god’s sake, don’t buy the ugly thing. It’s crap.”

“Not likely. Jacob wants me to do a little research.”

Carol applied her lipstick with expert slashes, eyed me in her vanity while she worked. “Research, huh?”

“Research, baby,” I said.

“Don’t do anything too stupid.” She shrugged on her coat, grabbed an umbrella. It was pouring out there.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Yeah, right. And don’t buy that crappy photo.” She pecked my cheek, left me sneezing in a cloud of perfume and hairspray.

New Year’s Eve sneaked up on me. I stopped dragging my feet and made calls to friends of friends in the Bay Area, hoping to get a line on the enigmatic Mr. Thornton. No dice. However, the name triggered interesting matches on the Internet. According to his former associates, a couple of whom were wards of the federal penal system, Thornton had been a flower child; an advocate of free love, free wine and free thinking. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Shep’s intelligence was more thorough. After quitting grad school Thornton organized a commune in San Francisco in the ’60s, penned psychedelic tracts about the nature of faith and divine cosmology, appeared on local talk radio and did cameos in film documentaries. He’d also gotten himself charged with kidnapping and contributing to the delinquency of minors. Disgruntled parents accused him of operating a cult and brainwashing runaway teens. Nothing stuck. His house burned down in ’74 and the commune disbanded, or migrated; reports were fuzzy.

Thornton resurfaced in 1981 to purchase *Parallax Beta* at an estate sale in Manitoba. Its owner, a furrier named Robespierre, had come to an unfortunate fate—Robespierre got raving drunk at a party, roared off in his brand new Italian sports car and plunged into a ravine. Authorities located the smashed guardrail, but no further trace of the car or its drunken occupant.

Thornton’s relatives were either dead or had disowned him. There was a loyal cousin in Cleveland, but the lady suffered from Alzheimer’s, thus tracking him through family was a no-go. Shep confirmed getting stonewalled by the Weston Gallery. Ah, a dead end; my work here was done.

Except, it wasn’t.

It began as the traditional New Year’s routine. I drank and contemplated my navel about a wasted youth. I drank and contemplated the gutted carcass of my prospects. I drank and contemplated what *Parallax Alpha* was doing to my peace of mind.

Initially, I wrote it off as interest due on multiple fractures and damaged nerves. My lower back went into spasms; pain banged its Viking drum. I chased a bunch of pills with a bunch more eighty-proof and hallucinated. With sleep came ferocious nightmares that left welts under my eyes. *Dinosaurs trumpeting, roaches clattering across the hulks of crumbling skyscrapers. Dead stars in a dead sky. Skull-yellow planets caught in amber—a vast, twinkling necklace of dried knuckles. The beast in the photograph opening its mouth to batten on my face.* I was getting this nightmare, and ones like it, with increasing frequency.

I wasn’t superstitious. Okay, the series had a bizarre history that got stranger the deeper I dug; bad things dogged its owners—early graves, retirement to asylums, disappearances. And yeah, the one picture I had viewed gave me a creepy vibe. But I wasn’t buying into any sort of paranormal explanation. I didn’t believe in curses. I believed in alcoholism, drug addiction and paranoid delusion. Put them in a shaker and you were bound to lose your marbles now and again.

Then one evening, while sifting Teddy’s personal effects—going through the motions to get Jacob off my back—I found a dented ammo box. The box was stuffed with three decades’ worth of photographs, although the majority were wartime shots.

Whenever he had a few drinks under his belt, Jacob was pleased to expound upon the grittier side of his favorite uncle. Jolly Saint Teddy had not always been a simple playboy multimillionaire. Oh, no, Teddy served in Vietnam as an intelligence officer; spooks, the boys called them. Predictable as taxes, really—he’d recently graduated from Dartmouth and there was a war on. A police action, if you wanted to get picky, but everybody knew what it was.

The snapshots were mainly of field hijinks with the troops and a few of Saigon R&R exploits. From what I could discern, when they were in the

rear areas, all the intelligence guys dressed like Hollywood celebrities auditioning for a game show—tinted shooting glasses, Hawaiian shirts, frosty Coke bottles with teeny umbrellas at hand, a girl on each arm; the whole bit. Amusing, in a morbid sense. One of the field shots caught my attention and held it. It was not amusing in any sense.

The faded caption read, *Mekong D. 1967*. A platoon of marines decked out in full combat gear, mouths grinning in olive-black faces. Behind them were two men dressed in civilian clothes. I had no problem recognizing Anselm Thornton from Shep's portfolio, which included newspaper clippings, class albums from Texas A&M, and a jittery video-taped chronicle of the beatniks. Thornton's image was fuzzy—a pith helmet obscured his eyes, and a bulky, complicated camera was slung over one shoulder; sweat stains made half-moons under his armpits. Had he been with the press corps? No, the records didn't lie. During Nam Thornton had been dropping LSD and poaching chicks outside of Candlestick Park.

Teddy, the old, exquisitely corpulent Teddy I knew, stood near him, incomprehensibly juxtaposed with these child-warriors. He wore a double-breasted suit a South American tailor had made recently. The suit restrained a once powerful frame sliding to blubber. Below a prominent brow, his face shone a mottled ivory; his eyes were sockets. His mouth gaped happily, smoldering with dust and cobwebs. A structure loomed beyond the marines. Screened by foliage, a battered marquee took shape. The marquee spelled al d in. The building was canted at an alarming angle; greasy smoke mushroomed from the roof.

That gave me pause. The Aladdin used to be Teddy's residence of choice when he visited Vegas. It was in a back room of that sacred hotel he once shook hands with his hero, the inestimable Dean Martin—who, in his opinion, was the better half of the Lewis & Martin act—during a high-stakes poker game reserved for the *crème de la crème* of big-shot gamblers. Teddy didn't qualify as a whale, as they referred to those suckers who routinely lost half a mil in one night, but he dropped his share of iron at the tables, and he always did have a knack for being at the heart of the action. I squinted at that photo until my eyes crossed—it was the Aladdin, no question. Yet an Aladdin even Teddy might not have recognized. Gray

smudges in the windows were faces gazing down upon the razed jungle. Many of them were laughing or screaming.

I couldn't figure out what the hell I was seeing. I pawed through the box by the light of a Tiffany lamp while a strong winter rain bashed at the windows. More of the same; nearly 300 pictures, all out of kilter, many in ways I never did quite understand. The latest seemed to contain medical imagery—some kind of surgery in progress. Overexposed, they formed a ruddy patina that was maddeningly obscure: Teddy's face streaked with blood as someone stitched his scalp in near darkness; coils of achromatic motion and pale hands with thick, dirty nails; a close-up of a wound, or a flower's corona; white, pink and black. It was impossible to identify the action.

I stopped looking after that, hedged around the issue with Jacob, asked him in an oblique way if his uncle might've known Thornton, during the halcyon days. Jacob was skeptical; he was certain such a fact would've come to light during Teddy's quest for the *Imago Sequence*. I didn't tell him about the ammo box; at that point it seemed wiser to keep my mouth shut. Either I was losing my sanity, or something else was happening. Regardless, the pattern around Jacob's inherited art piece was woven much tighter than I had suspected. The whole mess stank and I could only speculate how ripe it would become.

3

I drove to Bellevue for an interview with Mrs. Florence Monson Chin, previous owner of *Parallax Alpha.* Her family had placed her in Grable, the best that money, a heap of money, could buy. Intimates referred to it as the Grable Hotel or Club Grable. These days, her presence there was an open secret thanks to the insatiable press. No matter; the hospital had a closed-doors policy and an iron fist in dealing with staff members who might choose to blab. Any news was old news.

Mrs. Chin was heiress to the estate of a naturalized Chinese businessman who'd made his fortune breeding rhesus monkeys for medical research. His associates called him the Monkey King. After her elderly husband passed on, Mrs. Chin resumed her debutante ways, club-hopping from Seattle to

the French Riviera, screwing bullfighters, boxers and a couple foreign dignitaries, snorting coke and buying abstract art—the more abstract, the more exquisitely provincial, the better. The folks at *Art News* didn't take her seriously as a collector, but it seemed a black AmEx card and a mean streak opened plenty of doors. She partied on the wild and wooly side of high society right up until she flipped her wig and got clapped in the funny farm.

I knew this because it was in all the tabloids. What I didn't know was if she would talk to me. Jacob made nice with her father, got me a direct line to her at the institution. She preferred to meet in person, but gave no indication she was particularly interested in discussing *Parallax Alpha*. She didn't sound too whacko on the phone, thank god.

Grable loomed at the terminus of a long gravel lane. Massive and Victorian, the institution had been freshly updated in tones of green and brown. The grounds were hemmed by a fieldstone wall and a spiral maze of orchards, parks and vacant farmland. I'd picked a poor time of year to visit; everything was dead and moldering.

The staff oozed courtesy; it catered to a universally wealthy and powerful clientele. I might've looked like a schlep, nonetheless, far safer to kiss each and every ass that walked through the door. An androgynous receptionist processed my information, loaned me a visitor's tag and an escort named Hugo. Hugo deposited me in a cozy antechamber decorated with matching wicker chairs, an antique vase, prints of Mount Rainier and Puget Sound, and a worn Persian rug. The prints were remarkably cheap and crappy, in my humble opinion. Although, I was far from an art critic. I favored statues over paintings any day. I twiddled my thumbs and pondered how the miracle of electroshock therapy had been replaced by cable television and self-help manuals. The wicker chair put a crick in my neck, so I paced.

Mrs. Chin sauntered in, dressed in a superfluous baby-blue sports bra with matching headband and chromatic spandex pants. Her face gleamed, stiff as a native death mask; her rangy frame reminded me of an adolescent mummy without the wrapper. I read in *US* that she turned forty-five in the spring; her orange skin was speckled with plum-dark liver spots that formed clusters and constellations. She tested the air with predatory tongue-flicks. "Mr. Cortez, you are the most magnificently ugly man I have seen since

papa had our gardener deported to Argentina. Let me tell you what a shame that was."

"Hey, the light isn't doing you any favors either, lady," I said.

She went into her suite, left the door ajar. "Tea?" She rummaged through kitchen drawers. A faucet gurgled and then a microwave hummed.

"No thanks." I glanced around. It was similar to the antechamber, except more furniture and artwork—she liked O'Keefe and Bosch. There were numerous oil paintings I didn't recognize; anonymous nature photographs, a Mayan calendar, and a smattering of southwestern pottery. She had a nice view of the grounds. Joggers trundled cobble paths; a peacock fan of pastel umbrellas cluttered the commons. The place definitely appeared more an English country club than a hospital. "Great digs, Mrs. Chin. I'm surprised they let you committed types handle sharp objects." I stood near a mahogany rolltop and played with a curved ceremonial knife that doubled as a paperweight.

"I'm rich. I do whatever I want." She returned with cups and a Tupperware dish of steaming water. "This isn't a prison, you know. Sit."

I sat across from her at a small table with a centerpiece of wilted geraniums and a fruit bowl containing a single overripe pear. A fat bluebottle fly crept about the weeping flesh of the pear.

Mrs. Chin crumbled green tea into china cups, added hot water, then honey from a stick with an expert motion, and leaned back without touching hers. "Hemorrhoids, Mr. Cortez?"

"Excuse me?"

"You look uncomfortable."

"Uh, back trouble. Aches and pains galore from a misspent youth."

"Try shark cartilage. It's all the rage. I have a taste every day."

"Nummy. I'll pass. New Age health regimens don't grab me."

"Sharks grow new teeth." Mrs. Chin said. "Replacements. Teeth are a problem for humans—dentistry helps, but if an otherwise healthy man has them all removed, say because of thin enamel, he loses a decade, perhaps more. The jaw shortens, the mouth cavity shrinks, the brain is fooled. A general shutdown begins to occur. How much happier our lives would be,

with the shark's simple restorative capability." This spooled from her tongue like an infomercial clip.

"Wow." I gave her an indulgent smile, took a cautious sip of tea. "You didn't slip any in here, did you?"

"No, my stash is far too expensive to waste on the likes of you, Mr. Cortez. Delightful name—are you a ruthless, modern day conqueror? Did you come to ravish my secrets from me?"

"I'm a self-serving sonofabitch if that counts for anything. I don't even speak Spanish. English will get you by in most places, and that's good enough for me. What secrets?"

"I'm a sex addict."

"Now that's not exactly a secret, is it?" It wasn't. Her exploits were legendary among the worldwide underground, as I had learned. She was fortunate to be alive. "How do they treat that, anyway?"

"Pills, buckets of pills. Diversion therapy. They replace negative things with positive things. They watch me—there are cameras everywhere in this building. Does the treatment work?" Here she winked theatrically. "I am permitted to exercise whenever I please. I love to exercise—endorphins keep me going."

"Sad stuff. Tell me about *Parallax Alpha.*" I produced a notebook, uncapped a pen.

"Are you so confident that I will?" she said, amused.

"You're a lonely woman, I've a sympathetic ear. Consider it free counseling."

"Pretty. Very pretty. Papa had to sell a few of my things, balance the books. Did you acquire the photograph?"

"A friend of mine. He wants me to find out more about it."

"You should tell your friend to go to hell."

"Really."

"Really." She picked up the pear, brushed the fly off, took a large bite. Juice glistened in her teeth, dripped from her chin. She dabbed it with a napkin. Very ladylike. "You don't have money, Mr. Cortez."

“I’m a pauper, it is true.”

“Your friend has many uses for a man like you, I’m sure. Well, the history of the *Imago Sequence* is chock full of awful things befalling rich people. Does that interest you?”

“I’m not overly fond of the upper class. This is a favor.”

“A big favor.” Mrs. Chin took another huge bite, to accent the point. The lump traveled slowly down her throat—a pig disappearing into an anaconda. “I purchased *Parallax Alpha* on a lark at a seedy auction house in Mexico City. That was years ago; my husband was on his last legs—emphysema. The cigarette companies are making a killing in China. I was bored; a worldly stranger invited me to tour the galleries, take in a party. I didn’t speak Spanish either, but my date knew the brokers, landed me a fair deal. The joke was on me, of course. My escort was a man named Anselm Thornton. Later, I learned of his connection to the series. You are aware that he owns the other two in the collection?”

“I am.”

“They’re bait. That’s why he loans them to galleries, encourages people with lots of friends to buy them and put them on display.”

“Bait?”

“Yes, bait. The photographs radiate a certain allure; they draw people like flies. He’s always hunting for the sweetmeats.” She chuckled ruefully. “I was sweet, but not quite sweet enough to end up in the fold. *Alpha* was mine, though. Not much later, I viewed *Beta*. By then the reaction, whatever it was, had started inside me, was consuming me, altering me in ways I could scarcely dream. I craved more. God, how I begged to see *Imago!* Anselm laughed—laughed, Mr. Cortez. He laughed and said that it was too early in the game for me to reintegrate. He also told me there’s no *Imago*. No *Imago*, no El Dorado, no Santa Claus.” Her eyes were hard and yellow. “The bastard was lying, though. *Imago* exists, perhaps not as a photograph. But it exists.”

“Reintegrate with what, Mrs. Chin?”

“He wouldn’t elaborate. He said, ‘We are born, we absorb, we are absorbed. Therein lies the function of all sentient beings.’ It’s a mantra of

his. Anselm held that thought doesn't originate in the mind. Our brains are rather like meaty receivers. Isn't that a wild concept? Humans as nothing more than complicated sensors, or mayhap walking sponges. Such is the path to ultimate, libertine anarchy. And one might as well live it up, because there is no escape from the cycle, no circumvention of the ultimate, messy conclusion; in fact, it's already happened a trillion times over. The glacier is coming and no power will hold it in abeyance."

I didn't bother writing any of that down; I was plenty spooked before she came across with that booby-hatch monologue. I said, "It sounds like extremely convenient rationale for psychopathic behavior. He dumped you after your romp?"

"Frankly, I'm a lucky girl. Anselm deemed me more useful at large, spreading his influence. I brought *Parallax Alpha* stateside—that was the bargain, my part in the grand drama. Life went on."

"You got together in Mexico?"

"Yes. The resort threw a ball, a singles event, and Roy Fulcher made the introductions. Fulcher was a radical, a former chemist—Caltech, I believe. Struck me as a naturalist gone feral. A little bird informed me the CIA had him under surveillance—he seemed primed to blow something up, maybe spike a city reservoir. At the outset I suspected Fulcher was approaching me about funding for some leftist cause. People warned me about him. Not that I needed their advice. I had oodles of card-carrying revolutionaries buzzing in my hair at the time. Soon, I absolutely abhorred the notion of traveling in Latin America. Fuck the guerillas, fuck the republic, I just want a margarita. Fulcher wasn't after cash, though. He was Anselm's closest friend. A disciple."

"Disciple, gotcha." I scribbled it in my trusty notebook. "What's Thornton call his philosophy? Cultist Christianity? Rogue Buddhism? Crystal worship? What's he into?"

She smiled, stretched, and tossed the remains of her fruit in a waste basket shaped like an elephant foot. "Anselm's into pleasure. I think it fair to designate him the reigning king of sybarites. I was moderately wicked when I met him. He finished me off. Go mucking about his business and he'll do for you too."

“Right. He’s Satan, then. How did he ruin you, Mrs. Chin? Did he hook you on drugs, sex, or both?”

Her smile withered. “Satan may not exist, but Anselm surely does. Drugs were never the issue. I could always take them or leave them, and it’s more profound than sex. I speak of a different thing entirely. There exists a quality of corruption you would not be familiar with—not on the level or to the degree that I have seen, have lived.” She stopped, studied me. Her yellow eyes brightened. “Or, I’m mistaken. Did you enjoy it? Did you enjoy looking at *Parallax Alpha?* That’s the first sign. It’s a special person who does; the kind Anselm drools over.”

“No, Mrs. Chin. I think it sucks.”

“It frightened you. Poor baby. And why not? There are things to be frightened of in that picture. Enlightenment isn’t necessarily a clean process. Enlightenment can be filthy, degenerate, dangerous. Enlightenment is its own reward, its own punishment. You begin to see so much more. And so much more sees you.”

I said, “I take it this was in the late ’80s, when you met Thornton? Rumor has it he’s a hermit. Not much of a high-society player. Yet you say he was in Mexico, doing the playboy shtick.”

“Even trapdoor spiders emerge from their lairs. Anselm travels in circles that will not publicize his movements.”

“How would I go about contacting him? Maybe get things from the horse’s mouth.”

“We’re not in touch. But those who wish to find him… find him. Be certain you wish to find him, Mr. Cortez.”

“Okay. What about Fulcher? Do you know where he is?”

“Oh, ick. Creepy fellow. I pretended he didn’t exist, I’m afraid.”

“Thanks for your time, Mrs. Chin. And the tea.” I started to rise.

“No more questions?”

“I’m fresh out, Mrs. Chin.”

“Wait, if you please. There’s a final item I’d like to show you.” She went away and returned with a slim photo album. She pushed it across the table

and watched me with a lizard smile to match her lizard eyes. “Can I trust you, Mr. Cortez?”

I shrugged.

She spoke softly. “The staff censors my mail, examines my belongings. There are periodic inspections. Backsliding will not be tolerated. They don’t know about these. These are of my vacation in Mexico; a present from Anselm. Fulcher took them from the rafters of the cathedral. Go on, open it.”

I did. There weren’t many photos and I had to study them closely because each was a section of a larger whole. The cathedral must’ve been huge; an ancient vault lit by torches and lanterns. Obviously Fulcher had taken pains to get the sequence right—Mrs. Chin instructed me to remove eight of them from the protective plastic, place them in order on the table. An image took root and unfolded. A strange carpet, stained rose and peach, spread across shadowy counterchange tiles, snaked around immense gothic pillars and statuary. The carpet gleamed and blurred in patches, as if it were a living thing.

“That’s me right about there,” Mrs. Chin tapped the third photo from the top. “Thrilling, to enact the writhing of the Ouroboros!”

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered. At least a thousand people coupled upon the cathedral floor. A great, quaking mass of oiled flesh, immortalized by Fulcher’s lens. “Why did you show me this?” I looked away from the pictures and caught her smile, cruel as barbed wire. There was my answer. The institution was powerless to eradicate *all* of her pleasures.

“Goodbye, Mr. Cortez. Goodbye, now.”

Leaving, I noticed another overripe pear in the fruit bowl, as if Mrs. Chin had replaced it by sleight of hand. A fly sat atop, rubbing its legs together, wearing my image in its prism eyes.

I wasn’t feeling well.

I awoke at 2 a.m., slick and trembling, from yet another nightmare. My head roared with blood. I rose, trying to avoid disturbing Carol, who slept with her arm shielding her eyes, my dog-eared copy of *The Prince* clutched in her fingers. I staggered into the kitchen for a handful of aspirin and a

glass of cold milk. There was a beer left over from dinner, so I drank that too. It was while standing there, washed in the unearthly radiance of the refrigerator light, that I realized the orgy in Mrs. Chin's photographs had been orchestrated to achieve a specific configuration. The monumental daisy chain made a nearly perfect double helix.

4

In the middle of January I decided to cruise down to San Francisco and spend a weekend beating the bushes.

I met Jacob for early dinner on the waterfront at an upscale grille called The Marlin. Back in the day, Teddy treated us there when he was being especially avuncular, although he had preferred to hang around the yacht club or fly to Seattle where his cronies played. Jacob handed me the Weston Gallery's business card and a roll of cash for expenses. We didn't discuss figures for Thornton's successful interrogation. The envelope would be fat and the goodwill of a wealthy, bored man would continue to flow freely. Nor did he question my sudden eagerness to locate the hermit art collector. Still, he must have noticed the damage to my appearance that suggested worse than a simple New Year's bender.

Following dinner, I drove out in the country to a farmhouse near Yelm for tequila and cigars with Earl Hutchinson, a buddy of mine since high school. He'd been a small, tough kid from Iowa; a so-called bad seed. He looked the part: slicked hair, switchblade in his sock, a cigarette behind his ear, a way of standing that suggested trouble. Hutch hadn't changed, only drank a little more and got harder around the eyes.

We relaxed on the porch; it was a decent night with icy stars sprinkled among the gaps. Hutch was an entrepreneur; while I was away in college he hooked up in the arms trade—he'd served as an artillery specialist in the Army, forged connections within the underbelly of America's war machine. He amassed an impressive stockpile before the anti-assault weapon laws put the kibosh on legal sales; there were dozens of AK-47s, M16s and Uzis buried in the pasture behind his house. I'd helped him dig.

These days it was guard dogs. He trained shepherds for security, did a comfortable business with local companies. I noticed his kennels were

empty except for a brood bitch named Gerta and some pups. Hutch said demand was brisk, what with the rise of terrorism and the sagging economy. Burglaries always spiked during recessions. Eventually the conversation swung around to my California trip. He walked into the house, came out with a .357 and a box of shells. I peeled four hundred bucks from my brand new roll, watched him press the bills into his shirt pocket. Hutch poured more tequila and we finished our cigars, reminiscing about happy times. Lied about shit, mainly.

I went home and packed a suitcase from college, bringing the essentials—winter clothes, pain pills, toiletries. I watered the plants and left a terse message on Carol's answering service. She'd flown to Spokane to visit her mother. She generally found a good reason to bug out for the high country when I got piss-drunk and prowled the apartment like a bear with a toothache.

I told her I'd be gone for a few days, feed the fish. Then I headed south.

The truth is, I volunteered for the California job to see the rest of the *Imago Sequence*. As if viewing the first had not done ample harm. In addition to solving Teddy's vanishing act, I meant to ask Thornton some questions of my own.

I attempted to drive through the night. Tough sledding—my back knotted from hunching behind the wheel. A dose of Vicodin had no effect. I needed sleep. Unfortunately, the prospect of dreaming scared the hell out of me.

I drove as long as my nerve held. Not fast, but methodically as a nail sinking into heartwood, popping Yellowjackets and blasting the radio. In the end the pain beat me down. I took a short detour on a dirt road and rented a motel room south of Redding. I tried to catch a couple hours of rest. It was a terrible idea.

Parallax Alpha ate its way into my dreams again.

The motel ceiling jiggled, tapioca pudding with stars revolving in its depths. The blackened figure at *Parallax Alpha*'s center seeped forth. I opened my mouth, but my mouth was already a rictus. The ceiling swallowed me, bones and all.

—I squatted in a cavernous vault, chilled despite the rank, humid darkness pressing my flesh. Stench burrowed into my nose and throat. Maggots,

green meat, rotten bone. Thick, sloppy noises, as wet rope smacking rock drew closer. A cow gave birth, an eruption. The calf mewled—blind, terrified. Old, old water dripped. An army of roaches began to march; a battalion of worms plowed into a mountain of offal; the frenetic drone of flies in glass; an embryonic bulk uncoiling in its cyst—

I awakened, muscles twitching in metronome to the shuttering numbers of the radio clock. Since Christmas my longest stretch of uninterrupted sleep was three hours and change. I almost relished the notion of a grapeshot tumor gestating in my brain as the source of all that was evil. It didn't wash; too easy. So said my puckered balls, the bunched hackles of my neck. Paleontologists, anthropologists, ordained priests, or who-the-hell-ever could debate the authenticity of Ammon's handiwork until the cows came home. My clenched guts and arrhythmic heart harbored no doubt that he had snapped a photo of someone or something truly unpleasant. Worse, I couldn't shake the feeling that Mrs. Chin was correct: it had looked right back at me. It was looking for me now.

I got on the road; left a red fantail of dust hanging.

Midmorning crawled over the Frisco skyline, gin blossom clouds piling upon the bay. I drove to the address on the card, a homely warehouse across from a Mexican restaurant and a mortgage office that had been victimized by graffiti artists, and parked in the alley. Inside the warehouse were glass walls and blue shadows broken by giant ferns.

I lifted a brochure from a kiosk in the foyer; a slick, multicolored pamphlet with headshots of the director and his chief cronies. I slipped it into my blazer pocket and forged ahead. The lady behind the front desk wore a prison-orange jumpsuit. Her hair was pulled back so tightly it forced her to smile when she shook my hand. I asked for Director Stanley Renfro and was informed that Mr. Renfro was on vacation.

Could I please speak to the acting director? She motioned me beyond shadowbox panels to the rear of the gallery where a crew of Hispanic and Vietnamese day laborers sweated to dismantle an installation of a scale city park complete with fiberglass fruit trees, benches and a working gothic fountain. I picked my way across the mess of tarps, coax and sawdust.

Motes hung in the too-bright wash of stage lights. A Teutonic symphony shrilled counterpoint to arc welders.

Acting director Clarke was a lanky man with a spade-shaped face. A serious whitebread bastard with no interest in fielding questions about Thornton or his photograph. Clarke was sated with the power rush of his new executive position; I sensed I wouldn't be able to slip him a few bills to grease the rails and I'd already decided to save breaking his head as a last resort.

I used charm, opening with a throwaway remark about the genius of Maurice Ammon.

Clarke gave my haggard, sloppy self the once-over. "Ammon was a hack." His eyes slightly crossed and he talked like a man punching typewriter keys. "Topless native women suckling their babies; bone-through-the-nose savages leaning on spears. Tourist swill. His specialty."

"Yeah? Don't tell me the Weston Gallery is in the business of showcasing hacks?"

"We feature only the highest-caliber work." Clarke paused to drone pidgin Spanish at one of the laborers. When he looked up at me again his sneer hardened. "I dislike the *Imago Sequence*. But one cannot deny its… resonance. Ammon got lucky. Doesn't overcome a portfolio of mediocrity."

No, he didn't like the series at all. I read that plainly from the brief bulge of his eyes similar to a horse getting a whiff of smoke for the first time. The reaction seemed reasonable. "A three-hit wonder." I tried to sound amiable.

It was wasted. "Are you a cop, Mr. Cortez?"

"What, I look like a cop to you?"

"Most citizens don't have so many busted knuckles. A private eye, then."

"I'm a tourist. Do you think Ammon actually photographed a fossilized cave man?"

"That's absurd. The so-called figures are geological formations. Ask the experts."

"Wish I had nothing else to do with my life. You don't buy it, eh?"

"The hominid theory is titillation." He smirked. "It does sell tickets."

“He got bored with native titties and went for abstract art? Sure looks like a troglodyte to me.”

“Well, pardon my saying you don’t know squat about photography and I think you’re here on bad business. Did the toad send you?”

I chuckled. “You’ve met Teddy.”

“Never had the pleasure. I saw him in September, sniffing around the photo, practically wetting his pants. Figured he was trying to collect the set. I’ll tell *you* exactly what Renfro told *him: Parallax Beta* is not for sale and its owner is not interested in discussing the matter.”

“Renfro said that to Teddy, did he? Seems I’m chasing my tail then.” He had said what I hoped to hear. “By the way, where did Mr. Renfro go for his vacation? Somewhere warm, I hope.”

Clarke’s sneer broadened. “He’s on sabbatical.” From the pleasure in his tone he did not expect his former patron to return.

“Well, thanks for your time.”

“Adios, Mr. Cortez. Since you came for a peek at *Parallax Beta*, stop by the Natural History display.”

“Blessings to you and your children, Herr Director.” I went where he pointed, trying to act casual. The prospect of viewing the second photograph filled me with elation and dread. There it was, hanging between the Grand Tetons and the caldera of slumbering Mt. Saint Helens.

Parallax Beta was the same photograph as *Alpha*, magnified tenfold. The amber background had acquired a coarser quality, its attendant clots and scars were more distinct, yet more distinctly ambiguous. They congealed to form asteroid belts, bell-shaped celestial gases, volcanic moons. The hominid’s howling mouth encompassed the majority of the picture. It seemed capable of biting off my head, of blasting my eardrums with its guttural scream.

My vision tunneled and I tore myself away with the convulsive reflex of a man awakened from a dream of falling. *Panpipes, clashing cymbals, strobes of meteoric rain. Dogs snarling, a bleating goat. Buzzing flies, worms snuggling in musty soil*. All faded as I lurched away, routed from the field.

I made it to the lobby and drank from the water fountain, splashing my face until the floor stopped tilting. The lady in the jumpsuit perched behind her desk, vulture-talons poised near the phone. She extended another wintry smile as I retreated from the building into the hard white glare.

Eleven a.m. and next to zero accomplished, which meant I was basically on schedule. I was an amateur kneecap man, not a PI. My local connections were limited to a bookie, a sports agent who might or might not be under indictment for money laundering, and the owner of a modest chain of gymnasiums. I adjourned to a biker grille called the Hog and downed several weak Bloody Marys with a basket of deep-fried oysters. The lunch crowd consisted of two leathery old timers sipping draft beer, their Harley Davidson knockoffs parked on the curb; a brutish man in a wife beater t-shirt at the bar doing his taxes on a short form; and the bartender who had so much pomade in his hair it gleamed like a steel helmet. The geriatric bikers were sniping over the big NFC championship game coming up between the Niners and the Cowboys.

Between drinks, I borrowed the bartender's ratty phonebook. Half the pages were ripped out, but I found a listing for S. Renfro, which improved my mood for about three seconds. I tried ringing him from the payphone next to the men's room. A recorded message declared that the number was not in service, please try again. Following Hog tradition, I tore out the page and saved it for later.

I called Jacob collect. After he accepted charges, I said, "Were you around Teddy before he disappeared?"

"Eh? We've been over this."

"Be nice, I'm slow."

Several static-laden beats passed. Then, "Um, not so much. Teddy's always been secretive, though."

"Okay, was he *more* or *less* secretive those last few weeks?"

He coughed in a phlegmy way that suggested I had prodded him from the slumber of the indolent rich. "I don't know, Marv. I got used to him sneaking around. What's going on?"

“I haven’t figured that out yet. Did his habits change? And I mean even an iota.”

“No—wait. He dressed oddly. Yeah. Well, more than usual, if you want to split hairs.”

“I’m listening.”

“Give me a sec…” Jacob cursed, knocked something off a shelf, cursed again. A metallic snick was followed by a scratchy drag into the receiver. “He wore winter clothes a lot at the end. Inside, too, the few times I saw him. You know—sock cap, mackinaw and boots. He looked like a Canadian longshoreman. Said he was cold. But, what’s that? Teddy dressed for safari half the time. He was eccentric.”

“Thin blood. Too many years in the tropics,” I said.

“You have anything yet?”

“Nope. I’m just trying to cover all the bases.” I wondered if dear, departed Theodore had suffered night sweats, if he had ever lain in bed staring at a maw of darkness that grinned toothless as a sphincter. I wondered if Jacob did.

Jacob said, “You don’t think he was mixing with a rough element, right?”

“Probably not. He was going batty, fell into the drink. Stuff like this happens to seniors. They find them wandering around race tracks or shopping malls. Happens every day.”

“Keep digging anyway.”

“I’ll hit you back when I find more. Bye, bye.” I broke the connection, rubbed sweat from my cheek. I needed a shave.

The last call was to my bookie friend. I took the Cowboys and the points because I hoped to counter the growing sense of inevitability hanging over my head like Damocles’ least favorite pig sticker. Come Sunday night I owed the bookie fifteen hundred bucks.

5

Stanley Renfro’s house drank the late afternoon glow. Far from imposing; simply one of many brick and timber colonials bunkered in the surrounding

hills. It was painted in conservative tones and set back from the street, windows blank. A blue sedan was parked in the drive, splattered with enough seagull shit to make me suspect it hadn't moved lately. Half a dozen rolled newspapers decomposed on the shaggy lawn. The grass was shin-high and climbing.

I did not want to walk up the block and enter that house.

My belly churned with indigestion. A scream had recently interrupted my fitful doze. This scream devolved into the dwindling complaints of a bus horn. Minutes later when the sodium lamps caught fire and Renfro's house remained black, I decided he was dead.

This leap of intuition could not be proved by yellow papers or flourishing weeds. *Nah, the illustrious director might be taking a nap. No need to turn the lights on. Maybe he's not even inside. Maybe he's in Borneo stealing objets d'art from the natives. He left his car because a crony gave him a lift to the airport. He forgot to cancel the newspaper. Somebody else forgot to cut the grass.* Sure. The house reminded me of a corpse that hadn't quite begun to fester. I retrieved a flashlight from the glove compartment. Thick, and made of steel, like cops use. It felt nice in my hand.

I climbed from the Chrysler, leaned against the frame until my neck loosened and I could rotate my head without catching a fireworks show. No one appeared to notice when I hiked through Renfro's yard, although a small dog barked nearby. The alarm system was cake—being predicated on pressure, all I needed to do was smash a kitchen window and climb through without disturbing the frame. This turned out to be unnecessary. The power was down and the alarm's emergency battery had died.

The kitchen smelled foul despite its antiseptic appearance. Street light spread my shadow into monstrous proportions. Water drooled around the base of the refrigerator. Distant traffic vibrated china in its cabinet. Everything reeked of mildew and decaying fruit.

I clicked on the flashlight as I proceeded deeper into the house. The ceilings were low. I determined within a few steps that the man was a bachelor. That relieved me. Beyond the kitchen, a narrow hall of dusky paneling absorbed my light beam. The décor was not extraordinary considering it belonged to the director of an art gallery—obscure oil

paintings, antique vases and ceramic sculptures. Undoubtedly the truly expensive bric-a-brac was stashed in a safe or strong room. I didn't care about that; I was hunting for a name, a name certain to be scribbled in Renfro's personal files.

The shipwrecked living room was a blow to my composure. However, even before I entered that demolished area, my wind was up. I felt as a man tiptoeing through a diorama blown to life-size. As if the outer reaches of the house were a façade that had not quite encompassed the yard.

Mr. Renfro had been on a working vacation, by the evidence. Mounds of wet dirt were heaped around a crater. Uprooted boards lay in haphazard stacks. Sawed joists gleamed like exposed ribs. The pit was deep and ugly —a cavity. I turned away and released a sluice of vodka, tomato juice and oyster chunks. Purged, I felt better than I had in days.

I skirted the destruction, mounted the stairs to the second floor. Naked footprints scarred the carpet, merging into a muddy path—the trail a beast might pound with its blundering mass. If Renfro made the prints, I figured him for around 6', 240. Not quite in my league, but hefty enough that I was happy to grip the sturdy flashlight. A metal bucket was discarded on the landing. Inside the upper bathroom, the clawfoot tub had cracked, overflowing dirt and nails. The sink was shattered. Symbols had been scrawled above the toilet with mud, but the flowery paper hung in shreds. I deciphered the letters MAG and MMON. A cockroach clambered up the wall, fell, started again. Its giant, horned silhouette crossed mine. I didn't linger.

I peeked in the master bedroom to be thorough. It too was victim of hurricane savagery. The bed was stripped, sheets wadded on the floor amid drifts of clothes. A set of designer luggage had barely survived; buckles and zippers sprung, meticulously packed articles disgorged like intestines. I got the distinct impression Renfro had planned a trip before whatever happened, happened.

Renfro had converted the spare bedroom to an office. Here were toppled oak file cabinets, contents strewn and stomped. My prize was a semi-collapsed desk, buried in a landslide of paper. Its sides bore gouges and impact marks. Thankfully Renfro hadn't filled this room with dirt. I

searched for his Rolodex amid the chaos, keeping an eye on the door. The house was empty, obviously the house was empty. Renfro wasn't likely to be lurking in a closet. He wasn't likely to come shambling into the office, caked with mud and blood and fondling a hatchet. I still kept an eye on the door.

A drawer contained more file hangers. Inside the R-T folder was an index card with A. THORNTON (*Imago Colony*) written in precise block letters, a Purdon address which was probably a drop box, a list of names that meant nothing to me, and an unmarked cassette tape. Actually the label had been smudged. I stuck the card and the tape in my pocket. On impulse I checked the Ws and found a listing for T. WILSON. *Parallax Alpha* was penned in the margin. Below that, in fresher ink—*Provender?*

Mission accomplished, I was eager to saddle up and get the hell out of Tombstone. Then my light illuminated the edge of a wrinkled photograph of Stanford lacrosse players assembled on a field. A dated shot, but I recognized a younger Renfro from the brochure in my pocket. He knelt front and center, sporting a permed Afro and a butterfly collar. His eyes and mouth were holes. They reminded me of how Teddy's mouth looked in his war pictures. They also reminded me of the pit Renfro had excavated in his living room. Behind the team, where campus buildings should logically be, reared the basalt ridge of a mountain. A flinty spine wreathed by primordial steam.

This was Teddy's photo collection redux. And there were more delights. I considered vomiting again.

I stared for a bit, turning the photo this way and that. Concentration was difficult, because my fingers shook. I sorted the papers again, including the pile on the floor, examining the various photographs and postcards that were salted through the general mess. Some framed, some not. Wallet-sized, to the kind grandma hangs above the mantle. This time I actually *looked* and beheld a pattern that my subconscious had recognized already. Each picture was warped, each was distorted. Each was a fake, a fabrication designed to unnerve the viewer. What other purpose could they serve?

I checked for splice marks, hints of computer grafting, as if my untrained eye could've helped. Nothing to explain the mechanics of the hoax. The

terrain was wrong in all of these. Very wrong. The sky was not quite the same sky we walked around under every day. No, the sky in the more peculiar photos appeared somewhat viscous with bubbles and spot discoloration—the sky was a solid. As a matter of fact, it kind of resembled amber. Shapes that might've been blimps hovered at the periphery, pressed against the fabric of the sky.

This was enough spooky bullshit for me. I beat feet.

Downstairs, I hesitated at the pit. I shined my lonely beam into the gloom. It was about twelve feet deep; the sides crumbled and seeped groundwater. A nasty thought had been ticking in my brain. *Where is Renfro? In the hole, of course.*

Which suggested he was hiding—*or lying in wait.* I didn't actually want to find him either way. Thornton's information was in my pocket. Assuming it panned out, there were many hours of driving ahead. But the nasty thought was ticking louder, getting closer. *Why is Renfro digging a hole under his very nice house? Wow, I wonder if it's related to his screwed up picture collection? And, oh, do you think it has anything to do with a certain photograph on loan to his precious gallery? Do you suppose he spent long, long hours in front of that picture, fixated, neglecting his duties until his people sent him on a little vacation? Don't call us, we'll call you.*

There was a lot of debris at the bottom of that hole. A lot of debris and the light was dimming as its batteries gave up the ghost and I couldn't be one hundred percent sure, but I glimpsed an earthen lump down there, right where the darkness thickened. A man-sized lump. At its head was a damp depression in which a small object glinted. When I hit it with the light, it flickered. Blinked, blinked.

6

I wanted to turn around and bolt for home, get back to my beer and cartoons. I headed for Purdon instead. A Mastodon sinking in a tar pit.

Purdon was a failed mill town several hours northeast of San Francisco—victim of the rise of environmentalism in the latter '90s. A mountainous region bracketed by a national park and a reservation. Rural and impoverished as all hell. Plenty of pot plantations, militia compounds and

dead mining camps; all of it crisscrossed with a few thousand miles of logging roads slowly being eaten by forest. An easy place to vanish from the planet.

My mind had been switched off for the last hundred miles.

I switched it off because I was tired of thinking about the events at Renfro's house. Tired of considering the implications. It occurred to me, not for the first time, that I had fallen down the rabbit hole and would awaken at any moment. Unfortunately, I had brought a couple of the suspect photos and they remained steadfastly bizarre. Combined with Teddy's, did this not suggest a supernatural force at work?

Thoughts like that are why I shut my mind off.

Better to stick with problems at hand. Problems such as motoring into the sticks looking for a man I had seen in ancient clippings and a jerky movie frame shot three decades prior. A man who was probably a certifiable lunatic if he had owned the *Imago Sequence* for so many years. Whether he might know the whereabouts of a petrified hominid, or the truth about the disappearance of a thoroughly modern human, no longer seemed important. The only matter of importance was finding a way to kill the nightmares. And if Thornton couldn't help me? Best not to scrutinize that possibility too closely. I could almost taste the cold, oily barrel of my revolver.

I played Renfro's tape. The recording was damaged—portions were garbled, others were missing entirely, comprised of clicking and deep sea warbles. The intelligible segments featured a male lecturer. *"—satiation is the natural inclination. One is likely to spend centuries glutting primitive appetites, wreaking havoc on enemies, and so forth. What then? That depends on the personality. Few would seek the godhead, I think. Such a pursuit would require tremendous imagination, determination… resources. Provender would be an issue. It is difficult to conceive the acquisition of so much ripe flesh. No, the majority will be content with leisurely hedonism—"*

The Chrysler groaned as it climbed. Night paled and the rain slackened into gray drizzle. Big hills, big trees, everything dripping and foggy. Signs grew sparse and the road fell apart. I had to pay attention lest my car be hurled into a ravine.

“—consumption of accelerated brainmatter being one proven catalyst. Immersion in a protyle sink is significantly more efficacious, albeit infinitely more perilous. Best avoided.” Laughter. The recording petered to static.

I reached Purdon in time for church. Instead, I filled my tank at the Union 76 next to the defunct lumber mill, washed and changed clothes in the cramped bathroom. At the liquor store I bought a bottle of cheap whiskey. Here was my indemnity from coming nightmares. Then I ate a huge breakfast at the Hardpan Café. The waitress, who might also have been the proprietor, was a shrewd-eyed Russian. There were a lot of Russian immigrants in the area, I discovered. She didn’t care for my looks, but she kept my coffee cup level and her thoughts to herself while I stared out the window and plotted my next move.

Not much to see—narrow streets crowded with warped 1920s salt box houses. For lease signs plastered dark windows. A few people, mostly hung-over men, prowled the sidewalks. Everybody appeared to wear flannel and drive dented pickups. Most of the trucks had full gun racks.

I asked the Russian woman about finding a room and was directed to the Pine Valley Motel, which was less lovely than it sounded—unless you were thinking pine box, and then, yeah, that was more accurate, in an esthetic sense. The motel sprawled in a gravel lot at the edge of town, northernmost wing gutted by a recent fire and draped with rust-stained tarps. Mine was the sole car parked in front.

A stoic senior citizen missing two fingers of his right hand took my money and produced the key. His stained ballcap read: PURDON MILL—AN AMERICAN COMPANY! For fun, I asked if he knew anything about Anselm Thornton or the Imago Colony and received a glassy stare as he honked his nose into a handkerchief.

The walls of No. 32 were balsa-thin and the bed creaked ominously, but I didn’t see any cockroaches. I counted myself lucky as I cracked the seal on the whiskey. I made it to within a pinky of the bottom before the curtain dropped.

Ants.

I shared a picnic with a woman who was the composite of several women, all of them attractive, all of them wanton yet motherly, like the new Betty

Crocker. She spoke words that held no weight and so fluttered away on the breeze with a vapor trail of pollen. Our feast was laid upon the requisite checkerboard blanket beneath a flowering tree with the grass and the sun and all that. With all that and the chirping birds and the painfully blue sky and the goddamned ants; I didn't notice the ants until the woman held a slice of bread to my lips and as I opened my mouth to accept the bread I saw an ant trapped in the honey. Too late, my mouth closed and I swallowed and I looked down and beheld them everywhere upon the checker cloth, these ants. Formicating. I rose up, a behemoth enraged, and trampled them in shallow puffs of dust. They died in their numbers, complaining in small voices as their works were conculcated—their wagon trains and caravans, their miniature Hippodromes and coliseums, their monuments and toy superstructures, all crashed, all toppled, all ablaze. I threw my head back to bellow curses and noticed the sun had become a pinhole. The hole openedopenedopened—

Open.

I stared at the ceiling and realized that I now slept with my eyes wide and glazed. Marbles, the last of my marbles.

Shadows flowed swiftly along the decrepit wallpaper of No. 32, shrinking from the muzzy glare of the sun as it wallowed behind clouds. The thermostat was set at body temperature and the room steamed. I didn't recall waking to do that. I had slept for eighteen hours. *Eighteen hours!* It was a bloody miracle! I dressed, avoiding the mirror.

There were various stratagems available, a couple of them clever. I wasn't feeling clever, though. In fact, my skull felt like a pot of mush.

I flashed a snapshot of Teddy at the locals, finally got a bite from the mechanic at the gas station. He remembered Teddy from the previous September—*Heavy guy, yeah; drivin' a foreign car, passin' through. North, I suppose, 'cause he asked where Little Egypt was. We get that a lot. Tourists want to fool around the mines. Ain't shit-all left, though. I checked his brakes—these roads are hell on brakes. He paid cash.*

No surprises, the jigsaw was taking its form.

I measured the dwindling girth of my money clip and dealt a portion of it to Rod, the pimply badger of a clerk at the post office. It went down smoothly

after I told him I was working for a family who believed their baby girl had joined a cult. Oh, this sweaty, mutton-chopped fellow became a regular Samaritan once the folding green was in his pocket. He came across with the goods—names and descriptions of the people who regularly accessed Thornton's box. He'd never seen Thornton, didn't know much about him and didn't want to. The Imago Colony? Zip. Thornton's group numbered about forty, although who knew?—what with tourist season and the influx of visitors come spring. They occupied mining claims somewhere on Little Egypt; kept to themselves. Mormons, or some shit. Weird folk, but nobody had heard about them causing trouble before. He let me look at a topographical map that showed Little Egypt was, in fact, a sizeable chunk of real estate. Thornton's camp could be any one of a dozen claims scattered throughout the area. I slipped him another fifty bucks to keep mum about our conversation.

Satisfied, I retreated to the Hardpan Café, which commanded an unobstructed view of the post office. I settled in to wait for my hippie friends to make the scene. The Russian lady was overjoyed.

Thornton's people arrived on Thursday. Two rough men dressed in greatcoats; they drove around town in a clanking two-ton truck with a canvas top. A military surplus vehicle capable of serious off-road travel. The U.S. Army star was mud-splattered.

I compared them to my list. One, a redhead, was a nobody. The other man was middling sized, with a dented forehead, pebbly eyes and a long beard that would've made Fidel Castro jealous. Roy Fulcher, larger and uglier than life. Still playing henchman to Thornton in the new century. Loyal as a dog; how sweet.

If any of the locals tipped the men that I had been asking about their operation, it was not evident. They nonchalantly gathered supplies while I lurked in the background. Toward evening Fulcher pointed the truck north and rumbled off with a load of dry goods, fuel, and mail. I trailed.

Eventually, the truck turned onto a gravel road. A bullet-raddled sign read: Little Egypt Rd. The metal pole was bent nearly double, victim of unknown violence. Rough country here; patches of concrete-hard snow gleamed under scraggly trees. In a few miles gravel gave way to a mud track and the

ruts were too deep for the Chrysler. I pulled over, shouldered a satchel I'd bought at the Purdon Thrifty Saver and started walking, carefully picking my way as twilight grew moss and the stars glittered like caltrops. As the air cooled, mist cloaked the branches and brambles.

The hills got steep fast, draining the strength from my legs. My back protested. I shook most of the bottle of aspirin into my mouth to stay on the safe side, and rested frequently. When the track forked, I shined my flashlight to orient on the freshest ruts. It wasn't difficult; it was like following a bulldozer up the mountain. I clicked the light off quickly, hoping to conceal my position, and continued trudging.

I checked my watch to gauge the mileage and discovered it had died at 6:32 p.m. Much later, my legs got too heavy and I slumped under a lonely pine. Clouds snuffed the stars.

7

The gray light swam as it brightened; rocks and brush solidified all around. Two inches of snow dusted the landscape like the face of a corpse.

My back had seized up. It hurt in a profound way. *Like a bitch,* as my pop would've said. The aspirin was gone, the whiskey too. It seemed impossible that I would ever stand. But I rose, among a shower of black motes and silvery comets. Rose with the chuffing sob of a steer as it is goaded onto the gangway. Then I hugged my homely little tree, pissed on my boots and trembled with nausea. I needed a drink.

The road curved upward in a series of switchbacks. The snow disintegrated to brown sludge. I staggered along the shoulder, avoiding the quagmire. My feet got wet anyway. I clutched at exposed roots and outcroppings. A bird scolded me.

Cresting a saddle in the hills I gazed upon the flank of a mountain about a quarter mile off. Shacks were scattered beneath the crags—tin roofs bled orange tracks in the snow. The truck Fulcher had driven was parked alongside two battered jeeps near a Quonset hut. Wood smoke coiled above the camp, chugged forth from several stacks. A knot of muddy pigs huddled in a paddock. Nothing else moved.

My glance fell upon a trio of silhouetted formations farther along the mountainside; too far to discern clearly. Pylons? The instant I spotted them a whisper of unease urged me to look elsewhere. To flee, yes. I patted the bulk of the revolver in my pocket and the whispers died away.

I gulped air and wished I'd thought to bring field glasses for this expedition. Keeping to the brush, I swung a wide northwest circle. Drawing closer to the pylons it registered that about a dozen jutted randomly above the stony field. Crows danced atop them, squawking their hideous argot. An unpleasant sensation of primitive familiarity rooted me in my tracks. The objects were made of milled poles planted at angles like king-sized Xs, each twice the height of a man. Symbols were carved into them. Latin? The farthest structure had something caught at its apex—a bundle of rags.

"Marvin!"

I turned. A man in a billowing poncho strode from the direction of the camp. He waved and I waved back automatically. The brush must not have concealed me so well after all. He walked swiftly, a stop-motion figure on grainy film. The haze had a spaghetti-western effect—it made him taller and shorter by turns and cast his face in gloom.

"Mr. Thornton?" I said when he halted before me. God, he was tall. I was no midget and I had to crane my neck at him.

"Welcome to the Pleasure Dome. Glad you could make it. We seldom receive visitors during the winter season." He sounded British and wore an Australian-style drover's hat pulled low over jagged brows and scaly eyes. Potbellied and thick through the hips, yet gangly and muscular the way a well-fed raptor is muscular. His enormous hands hung loosely. A thin-lipped mouth threatened to bisect his broad, sallow face. Lots and lots of stained, crooked teeth were revealed by his huge smile. "It has you, I see. Ticktock go the mitochondria—a nova in bloom. Marvelous, marvelous."

I stared at him and decided he was far too spry for a fellow pushing seventy-five. His movements were quick and powerful. His doll-smooth flesh radiated youthful heat. "Who told you I was coming?" I suspected someone at the Weston Gallery had phoned with the news. Were there phones up here?

Thornton hesitated as if he actually meant to answer the question. “Come back to the house. The ground is unsafe.”

“Unsafe, how?”

“Not all the shafts are properly sealed. Holes everywhere. Periodically someone disappears—they come poking around for souvenirs or gold and… well one misstep is all it takes. Teenagers, usually. Or tourists.”

I nodded in idiot silence, grappling with my instincts—my mind was a cacophony of ghostly exhortations to rap this man’s head while we were away from his presumed horde of disciples, to put him on his knees with the gun barrel under his jaw and pry loose the answers to a dozen pertinent questions. I recalled the lumpish shape at the bottom of Renfro’s hole, how it shuddered and quaked, and my hand dipped into my pocket—

“How’s Jacob, anyway?” Thornton had already turned his back. Maybe he was grinning. His dry, Victorian accent quavered up the register toward that of a crone’s.

“Jacob.” It seemed to be getting darker by the second in that desolate valley.

“The fellow who sent you to break my legs and whatnot. He misses his uncle. Kidding, kidding. Do you miss Teddy? Does anyone? It would be decent.”

“You know Jacob?”

“Not really. His uncle and I were friends, once. Teddy lived on the edge of my circle. I never gathered the impression he spoke of me to anyone… uninitiated. Jacob would not suit my purposes.”

“I’m here to find out what happened to Teddy.”

“Truly? I supposed you came because of the *Sequence*.”

“See, I’m kind of stuck on the chicken or the egg theory. I’ll take whatever I can get. So give.”

“Teddy vanished. A boating accident, wasn’t it?”

“After visiting you.”

“Teddy was a big boy. Big enough for both of us. Remove your hand from the gun, Marvin. Harm me and you’ll never get what you came for.”

My lungs burned. “Harm you. There’s no reason. Is there?”

“For some men, there is always a reason. It’s what you do well, hurting. You’re a terrier. I know everything about you, Marvin. I smell meanness cooking in your blood. The blood on your hands. I ask, do you want blood from me, or knowledge? Here is a crossroads.”

“I want to know about the photographs. I need to understand what’s happening to me.” I said this simply, even humbly. I removed my hand from the revolver.

“It’s not only happening to you. It’s happening to everyone, everywhere. *You’re* tuned in to the correct frequency, and therein lies the difference.” Thornton twisted his oversized head to regard me without shifting his shoulders. His face was milky. A face of unwholesome flexibility; and yes, his grin fetched to mind sickles and horns. “Let’s amble—we’ll do lunch, we’ll chat. I’ll show you my gallery. It’s an amazing gallery. I’ll show you *Imago.* You’ll enjoy it, Marvin. You’ll sleep again. Sleep without nightmares.” He was walking before he finished, beckoning with a casual twitch of his hand. His oilskin poncho slithered in his wake not unlike a tail.

I followed on wooden legs. Crows argued behind us.

The Quonset hut was so old its floor was a sunken mass of caramelized wood and dirt. An arch in the rear opened to darkness. Moth-eaten banners of curiously medieval design hung from the rafters, casting fluttery shadows upon the long table where I mechanically chewed a ham sandwich and drank a sour beer that Roy Fulcher had fetched. Thornton had departed, promising a swift return. He asked Fulcher to attend my needs.

Light oozed through window glass that sagged and pooled at the bottom of rotten frames. Crates made pyramids against the walls, alongside boxes, barrels and stacks of curling newspapers. Homey.

Fulcher watched me eat. His features were vulpine and his lank beard was stained yellow-brown around the mouth. He smelled ripe. Farther off, a group of fellow colonists played at a ping-pong table. They cast sly glances our way and chuckled with suppressed brutality. Four men, two women, ages indeterminate. They were scrawny, haggard and unwashed. Several more came and went, shuffling. Zombies but for a merry spark in their eyes, satisfied smirks.

I said, “Here’s the million-dollar question—where’s the caveman buried?”

“Caveman? I don’t think there’s a caveman.” Fulcher’s was an earthy accent, a nasal drawl that smacked of coal mines and tarpaper shanties.

“All this trouble and no caveman?”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Jacob will get over it,” I said. “I don’t suppose you’ll tell me where Ammon took the *Imago Sequence?* That won’t hurt anything, if there’s no caveman.”

Fulcher leaned in. “Take a spoon and dig a hole in your chest. That’s where he made his pictures.”

I pushed my plate aside. I wiped my lips with a dingy cloth towel. I stared at him, long and steadily. I said, “If you won’t talk about Ammon, tell me about your colony. Love what you’ve done with the place. What do you guys do for fun in these parts?” I’d cultivated a talent for reading people, weighing them at a glance, separating shepherds from sheep. It was nothing special; a basic survival technique—but it came up dry now. These people confounded my expectations. Was I in a commune or a militia compound? Were these hippie cultists, leftwing anarchists, or something else? I gave one of the more brazen ping-pong players—the redhead from town—a hard look. Fulcher had called him Clint. Clint’s grin vanished and he concentrated on his game. Human, at least.

“You know,” Fulcher said.

“I hate word games, Roy. They make me hostile.”

“Ask Anselm.”

“I’m asking you.”

“It brought you to us—one from multitudes. You still question what our work is here?”

“It? If you mean the *Imago Sequence*, then yeah, I’m full of questions.”

“Anselm will answer your *questions* in due course.”

“Well, Roy, problem is, I’m kind of stupid. People usually need to repeat stuff.”

Fulcher’s expression grew rigid. “You don’t want to see. Surprise—it’s too late. The fictions you’ve invented, your false assumptions, your pretenses, will soon be blown apart. I doubt it will profit you in the least. You’re a thug.”

“Story of my life; nobody likes me. I guess you’d be willing to show me the big picture. Shoot me down with your intellectual superiority.”

“Anselm will show you the cosmic picture, Mr. Cortez.”

“Isn’t it customary for you religious zealots to have pamphlets lying around? Betcha there’s a printing press somewhere in this Taj Mahal. Surely you’ve got propaganda for the recruits? And beads? I like beads.”

“No pamphlets, no recruits. This is *Imago Colony.* Religion doesn’t apply.”

“Oh, no? What’s with all the faux Roman crucifixes in the back forty?”

“The crucifixes? Those are authentic. Anselm imported them.”

I tried to wrap my mind around that concept. The implications eluded me. I said, “Bullshit. What the hell for?”

“The obvious—sport. Anselm has exotic tastes. He enjoys aspects of cultural antiquity.”

“Yeah, so I hear. And he has a thing about bugs, I guess; sort of similar to his mentor. Seems to be a reliable pattern with lunatics. An imago is an insect, right?”

“It’s symbolic.”

“Oh. I thought the bug thing was cute.”

“An imago is not *any* insect. The final instar of an insect, its supreme incarnation. Care for another beer?”

“I’m good.” I gestured at the ping-pong tournament. “Weedy crowd, Roy. Somebody told me there were forty, fifty of you in this camp.”

“Far less, these days. Attrition.”

“Uh, huh.”

“You’ve come during harvest season, Mr. Cortez. That’s what we do in the cold months. The others are engaged, those who remain. Things will quicken in the spring. People seem to be more driven to enlightenment

during sandal weather. Spiritualists, nature enthusiasts, software engineers on holiday with wives and kiddies. We get all kinds."

"Thornton is off to play plantation overseer, eh? I wonder what you kids harvest in these parts—poppies? Opium is Afghanistan's chief export—ask the Taliban what it paid for its military hardware, the light bills in its palaces. The climate around here is about goddamned ideal. You'd be millionaires. I've got a couple pals, line you right out for a piece of the pie."

Fulcher rubbed his dented brow, smiled. "What wonderful irony! We do love to trip. You have me there. Poppies, that's very funny. I almost miss those days. I stick with cigarettes anymore."

"Lay your gimmick on me."

"Evolution."

"You and everybody else."

"What do people want?" Fulcher raised his grimy hand to forestall my answer. "What do people truly want—what would induce a man to sell his soul?"

"To be healthy, wealthy and wise." I said with mild sarcasm. Mild because as I uttered the punch line to the children's rhyme, coldness began to unfold in my bones. The tumblers in my head were turning again.

"Bravo, Mr. Cortez. Power, wisdom, immortality." His expression altered. "We have found something that will afford us… longevity, at least. With longevity comes everything else."

"The Fountain of Youth?" *In the deep mountain woods a mossy statue spurted black water. Congregations of hillbillies in coveralls bathed in its viscid pool. A bonfire, a forest of uncured pelts swaying. A piper.* I shuddered. "Dancing girls, winning lotto tickets?"

"A catalyst. A mechanism that compresses aeons of future human evolution. Although future is a relative term."

"Ammon's photographs." It seemed obvious. Everything seemed patently obvious, except that the room was undulating and I couldn't figure out who was playing the flute. A panpipe, actually; high, thin, discordant. It pierced my brain.

Fulcher ignored the music. He flushed, warming to my edification. “The *Imago Sequence* is a trigger. If you’ve got the right genes you might already be a winner.”

I rubbed my ear; the pipe raised unpleasant specters to mind, set them gibbering. *The monstrous hominid opened its mouth wider, wider*. “How does that shit work?”

“Take a picture of God, tack it on the wall and see who bows. Recognition is the key. It doesn’t make a difference what you comprehend intellectually, only what stirs on a cellular level, what awakens when it recognizes the wellspring of creation.”

“Don’t tell me you believe the caveman is God.”

“I said there’s no caveman. Look deeper, friend. Reality lies beyond the surface. It’s not the Devil in the details, it’s God.”

“Aha! You *are* a bunch of Christian cultists.”

“We do not exist to worship an incomprehensible being. A being which assuredly lacks the means to appreciate slavish devotion.”

“Seems pointless to have a god at all, when you put it like that.”

“Do you supplicate plutonium? Do you sing hymns to uranium? We bask in the corona of an insensate majesty. In its sway we seek to lay the foundation blocks of a new city, a new civilization. We’re pioneers. Our frontier is the grand wasteland between Alpha and Omega.”

“Will you transform into a being of pure energy and migrate to Alpha Centauri?”

“Quite opposite. Successful animal organisms are enduring organisms. Enduring organisms are extremely basic, extremely efficient. Tarantulas. Scorpions. Reptiles. Flies.”

“Don’t forget cockroaches. They’re going to inherit the earth.” I laughed, began coughing. The room wobbled. “So Thornton is what—the messiah helping you become the best imago you can be?”

“Anselm is the Imago. We are maggots. We are provender.”

“I get it. He does the transcending and you get the slops.”

“It is good to have a purpose in life. To be an integral part of the great and terrible cycle.” Fulcher shook his head. “As I serve him, he served Ammon and Ammon served the one before him down through time gone to dust. *‘By sating the image of the Power they fulfill their fleshly contract. By suckling the teat of godliness the worthy shall earn their reward.’* Thus it is written in a book much more venerable than the Bible. For we who survive to remake ourselves in the image of the Power, all risks are acceptable.”

“Reverend Jones rides again! Pass the grape Kool-Aid!”

“Hysterical, much?”

“Naw, just lately.” I took a breath. “I wonder though, what does a guy do after he reaches the top of the ol’ ladder? Live in a cave and compose epic poetry? Answer riddles? Pick up a sword and lay waste to Rome?”

“Caligula was one of us, actually.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I plowed ahead. “Well?”

“Basic organisms require basic pleasures.”

“Basic pleasures?” The chilly sensation linked hands with vertigo and did a Scottish jig. I was as a figurine in that enormous room.

“Subsistence and copulation. That’s what the good life boils down to, my friend. Eating and fucking. Whoever you want, whatever you want, whenever you want.”

The mouth opening, opening—

“Power to the people.” I was slurring. Why was I slurring?

“Ready to go?” Fulcher rose, still smiling through his matted beard. We walked through the tall archway. He lightly gripped my elbow to steady me. One beer and I was drunk as a sailor on the third day of shore leave. The corridor expanded in the best Escher fashion, telescoping into infinite shadow. There were ragged tapestries at intervals, disfigured statues, a well-trammeled carpet with astrological designs. The corridor branched and branched again at grand arches marred by ages of smoke. At one fork, a kerosene lamp swung on a sooty chain. Behind a massive iron door the piping shrilled, died, shrilled. Hoarse screams of the primordial sex act, exhausted sobs, laughter and applause. Mrs. Chin’s photograph haunted me.

“The gallery,” Fulcher said.

I recognized the musk upon him, finally. For a horrible moment I thought we would go through that door. We continued down the other hall.

Fulcher brought me to a dingy chamber lit by a single dirty bulb in an overhead cage. The room was windowless and bare except for a large chair made of wood and iron. The chair had arm straps and leg shackles; an artifact from the Spanish Inquisition. It was not difficult to picture the fallen bishops, the heretical nobles who had shrieked in its embrace.

“Please, make yourself comfortable.” Fulcher helped me along with a shove.

I slumped in the strange chair, my head heavy as a wrecking ball, and watched as he produced a nasty looking bowie knife and expertly sliced off my clothes. When he encountered the revolver he emptied the cylinder, slid the weapon into his waistband without comment. He cinched my arms and legs; his fingers glowed, dragging tracers as they adjusted buckles and straps. Seemingly he had grown extra arms. I could only gawk at this phantasm; I felt quite docile. “Wow, Roy. What was in my beer? I feel terrific.”

“One should hope. You ingested several hundred milligrams of synthetic mescaline—enough to launch a rhinoceros into orbit.”

“Party foul, and on the first date too. I thought you didn’t do dope anymore.”

“I dabble in the manufacturing end of the spectrum. Frankly, all that metaphysical mumbo-jumbo about hallucinogens affecting perception in a meaningful way is wishful thinking. Poor Huxley.” Fulcher stepped back, surveyed his handiwork while rolling a cigarette. The yellow flare of his lighter painted his face, made him a devil. “Oh, except for you. You’re special. You’ve seen *Alpha* and *Beta*. As my pappy would say, you’ve got the taint, boy.” He blurred around the edges. With each inhalation the cherry of his cigarette brightened, became Jupiter’s red sore.

I noticed the walls were metallic—whorls whorled, pits and pocks formed. Condensation trickled. Smoke made arabesques and demons. The walls were a tapestry from a palace in Hell.

The panpipe started wheedling again and Thornton entered the room on cue. He pushed a rickety hospital tray with a domed cover. The cover was

scalloped, silver finish flaking. A maroon handprint smeared its curve.

"This is a bad sign," I said.

Thornton was efficient. He produced an electric razor and shaved a portion of my head to stubble, dug a thumb under my carotid artery and traced veins in my skull with a felt-tip pen. He tweaked my nose in a fatherly manner, stripped off his coat and rolled his sleeves to the elbows. His skin gleamed like coral, cast faint reflections upon the walls and ceiling. Shoals of phantom fish scattered above, regrouped and swam into an abyss; a superhighway and its endless traffic looped beneath my feet; it rippled and collapsed into a trench of unimaginable depths.

I watched him remove a headpiece from the tray—a clumsy framework of clamps and screws; a dunce cap with a collar. Parts had never been cleaned. I wanted to scream when he fitted it over my head and neck, locked it in place with a screwdriver. I sighed.

Fulcher stubbed his cigarette, produced a palm-sized digital camera and aimed it at me. He gave Thornton a thumbs-up.

Thornton selected a scalpel from the instruments on the tray, weighed it in his hand. "Teddy was a friend—I would never use him as provender, but neither could I set him on the path to Olympus. There's limited room in the boat, you see. Weak, genetically flawed, but a jolly nice fellow. A gentleman. Imagine my disappointment when he showed up on my doorstep last fall. Not only had the old goat bought *Parallax Alpha*, he'd viewed *Beta* as well. He demanded to see *Imago*. As if I could simply snap my fingers and show him. Wouldn't listen to reason, wouldn't go home and fall to pieces quietly like a good boy. So I enlightened him. It was out of my hands after that. Now, we come to you." He sliced my forehead, peeled back a flap of skin. Fulcher taped it down.

"What?" I said. "What?"

Thornton raised a circular saw with a greasy wooden handle. He attached it to a socket in my headpiece. "Trephination. An ancient method to open the so-called Third Eye. Fairly crude; Ammon taught me how and a Polynesian tribe showed him—he wasn't a surgeon either. He performed his own in a Bangkok opium den with a serrated knife and a corkscrew while a stoned

whore held a mirror. Fortunately, medical expertise is not a requisite in this procedure."

The dent in Fulcher's brow drew my gaze. I sighed again, saddened by wisdom acquired too late in the day.

Thornton patted me kindly. His touch lingered as a caress. "Don't fret, it's not a lobotomy. You wished to behold *Imago*, this is the way. What an extraordinary specimen you are, Marvin, my boy. Your transformation will be a most satisfying conquest as I have not savored in years. I am sure to delay your reintegration for the span of many delightful hours. I will have compensation for your temerity."

"Mr. Thornton," I gasped; trembled with the effort of rolling my eye to meet his. "Mrs. Chin said the glacier is coming. I dream it every night; flies buzzing in my brain. It's killing me. That's why I came."

Thornton nodded. "Of course. I've seen it a thousand times. Everyone who has crawled into my lair wanted to satisfy one desire or another. What will satisfy you, O juicy morsel? To hear, to know?" He yawned. "Would you be happy to learn there is but one God and that all things come from Him? Existence is infinitely simple, Marvin—cells within cells, dreams within dreams, from the molten Fingertip of God Almighty, to the antenna of a roach, on this frequency and each of a billion after. Thus it goes until the circuit completes its ambit of the core, a protean-reality where dwells an intellect of surpassing might, yet impotent, bound as it is in the well of its own gravity. Cognition does not flourish in that limitless quagmire, the cosmic repository of information. The lightning of Heaven is reduced to torpid impulses that spiral outward, seeking gratification by osmosis. And by proxy. We are bags of nerves and electrolytes, fragile and weak and we decompose so quickly. Which is the purpose, the very cunning design. Our experiences are readily digested to serve the biological imperative of a blind, vast sponge. Does it please you? Do you require more?"

A spike glinted within the ring of saw-teeth. Thornton casually pressed this spike into my skull, seated it with a few taps of a rubber mallet. He put his lips next to my ear. His breath reeked copper. "The prophets proclaim the end is near. I'll whisper to you something they don't know—the world ended this morning as you were sleeping, half-frozen on the mountainside.

It ended aeons before your father squirted his genetic material into your mother. It will end tomorrow as it ends every day, same time, same station." He started cranking.

Listening to the rhythmic burr of metal on bone I was thankful the mescaline had soldered my nerve endings. Thornton divided and divided again until he crowded the room. Pith helmets, top hats, arctic coats, khakis, corporate suits, each double dressed for a singular occasion, each one animated by separate experience, but all of them smiling with tremendous pleasure as they turned the handle, turned the handle, turned the handle. Their faces sloughed, dough swelling and splitting. Beneath was something raw, and moist, and dark.

I glimpsed the face of the future and failed to comprehend its shape. Blood poured into my eyes. The panpipe went mad.

8

The world ends every day.

Picture me walking in a rock garden under the dipping branches of cherry blossom trees. I love stones and there are heavy examples scattered across the garden; olive-bearded, embedded in the tough sod. God's voice echoes as through a gigantic gramophone horn, but softly from the lead plate of sky, and not God, it's Thornton guiding the progression, driving an auger into my skull while the music plays. Push it aside, keep moving toward a mound in the distance…

No Thornton, auger, no music; only God, the garden, and I. Where is God? Everywhere, but especially in the earth, the dark, warm earth that opens as a cave mouth in the side of a hill. God calls from the hill, in voices of grinding rock and gurgling water.

I walk toward the cave. Sleet falls, captured betwixt burning and freezing precisely as I am caught. Nor is the sleet truly sleet. A swirl of images falling, million-million shards fractured from a vast hoary mirror. There am I, and I and I a million-million times, broken, melting…

I walk through God's rock garden, trampling incarnations of myself…

Watery images flickered on the wall. A home movie with the volume lowered. Choppy because the cameraman kept adjusting to peer over the shoulder of a tall figure who attended a third person in the awful chair—my chair. The victim was not I; it was a mirror casting a false reflection. And it wasn't a movie in the strictest sense; I detected no camera, nor aperture to project the film. More hallucinations then. More something.

Teddy's face, trapped in the conical helm; his feet scuffed and rattled the shackles. Thornton blocked the view, elbow pumping with the practiced ease of a farmer's wife churning butter. Muffled laughter, walnuts being cracked. The image went dark, but the dim sounds persisted.

Claustrophobia gagged me. I was still strapped in the chair, the helm fixed to my head. There was a hole in my head. My right eye was crusted and blind. I was shuddering with chills. How much time had passed? Where had Fulcher and Thornton gone? Had they shown me *Imago* as promised? My memories balked.

As my faculties reengaged, my fear swelled. They had shredded my clothes, confiscated my belongings, tortured me. They would kill me. That was scarcely my fear. I dreaded what else would happen first.

The wall brightened with new images. *Sperm wriggled, hungry and fast. A wasp made love to a tarantula, thrusting, thrusting with its stinger. Mastiffs flung themselves upon a threshing stag, dangled from its antlers like ornaments. Fire ants swarmed over a gourd half-buried in desert earth—*

Fulcher drifted through the door, Clint at his heel. I remained limp when Fulcher scrutinized me briefly; he flashed a penlight in my good eye, checked my pulse. He murmured to his partner, and began unbuckling my straps. Clint hung back, perhaps to guard against a revival of my aggressive philosophy. Even so, he appeared bored, distracted.

I did not stir until Fulcher freed my arms. It occurred to me that the mescaline cocktail must've worn off because I wasn't feeling docile anymore. Nothing was premeditated; my mind was well below a rational state. I pawed his face—weakly, a drunken gesture, which he brushed aside. I became more insistent, got a fistful of his beard on the next half-hearted swipe, my left hand slithered behind his neck. Fulcher pried at my wrist,

twisted his head. Frantic, he braced his boot against the chair and tried to push off. His back bowed and contorted.

A ghostly spider mounted a beetle; they clinched.

Growing stronger, more purposeful, I yanked him into my lap, and his beard ripped, but that was fine. I squeezed his throat and vertebrate popped the way it happens when you lift a heavy salmon by the tail. Stuff separates.

Clint tried to pull Fulcher, exactly as a man will pull a comrade from quicksand. Failing, he snatched up a screwdriver and stabbed me in the ribs. No harm, my ribs were covered with a nice slab of gristle and suet. Punch a side a beef hanging from a hook and see what you get.

A truck careened across a strange field riddled with holes. The vehicle juked and jived and nose-dived into the biggest hole of them all—

I dropped Fulcher and staggered from the chair. Clint stabbed me in the shoulder. I laughed; it felt good. I palmed his face, clamped down with full strength. He bit me, began a thick, red stream down my arm. He choked and gargled. Bubbles foamed between my finger webs. I waltzed him on tiptoes and banged his head against a support beam. *Bonk, bonk, bonk*, just like the cartoons. Just like Jackson Pollock. I stopped when his facial bones sort of collapsed and sank into the general confusion of his skull.

I fumbled with the screws of my helm, gave it up as a hopeless cause. I left the cell and wandered along the hall, trailing one hand against the rough surfaces. People met me, passed me without recognition, without interest. These people were versions of myself. I saw *a younger me dressed in a tropical shirt and a girl on my arm; me in a funeral suit and a sawed-off shotgun in my hand; another me pale and bruised, a doughnut brace on my neck, hunched on crutches; still another me, gray-haired, dead drunk, wild glare fixed upon the middle distance*. And others, too many others coming faster until it hurt my eyes. They flowed around me, collided, disappeared into the deep, lightless throat of the hall until all possibilities were lost.

Weight shifted within the bowels of Thornton’s Pleasure Dome. A ponderous door was flung wide and a chorus of damned cries echoed up the corridors. The muscles between my shoulder blades tightened. I picked up the pace.

The main area was deserted but for a woman sweeping ashes from the barrel stove and a sturdy man in too-loose long johns eating dinner at a table. The woman was an automaton; she regarded me without emotion, resumed her mechanical duties. The man put aside his spoon, considering whether to challenge me. He remained undecided as I stumbled outside, bloody and birth-naked. The icy breeze plucked at my scalp, caused my wound to throb with the threat of a migraine. I was in a place far removed from such concerns.

A better man would've set a match to the drums of diesel, blown the place to smithereens Hollywood style. No action star, I headed for the vehicles.

Twilight cocooned the valley. The sky was smooth as opal. A crimson band pulsed at the horizon—the sun elongated to its breaking point. Clouds scudded from invisible distances, flew by at unnatural velocity.

"Don't go," Thornton said. A whisper, a shout.

I glanced back.

He filled the doorway of the Quonset hut, which was tiny, was receding. His many selves had merged, yet flickered beneath his skin, ready to burst forth. His voice had relinquished its command, now waned fragile, as it traveled across the gulf to find me. "You're opening doors without any idea of where they lead. It's a waste. Sweet God, what a waste!"

I kept walking, limping.

"Marvin!" A hot lash of hatred and appetite throbbed from his dwindling voice. "Say hello to Teddy!" He shrank to a speck, was lost.

A fleet of canvas-top trucks shimmered upon an island in a sea of velvet. They warped and ran with the fluidity of quicksilver, a kaleidoscope revolving around the original. I picked the closest truck and dragged myself inside. Keys dangled from the ignition. The helm was too tall for the cab; I was forced to drive with my head on my shoulder. Fresh blood seeped from the wound and obscured my vision.

The truck bucked and crow-hopped as I clanged gears, stomped the accelerator and sent it hurtling across the rugged valley. One road multiplied, became three roads, now six. Now, I was off the road, or the road had melted. Bizarre changes were altering the scenery, toying with my

feeble perception. The mountains doubled and redoubled and underwent the transformations of millennia—a range exploding forward, rounding and shortening, another backward, rearing into a toothy crown—in the span of heartbeats. It was a rough ride.

I found the knob for the headlights in time to illuminate the sinkhole a few dozen yards ahead. A rapidly widening maw. I slammed the brakes. The cab exploded with dust and smoking rubber. There was a tin-can-under-a-boot crunch and the truck yawed, paused at the rim and toppled in, nose-first. I performed a lazy belly flop through the windshield.

I didn't lose consciousness, unfortunately. I bounced and bones cracked along old fault lines. Eventually I stopped with a terrific jolt; a feather mattress dropped on a cavern floor. At least the truck didn't come down on top of me—it had lodged in a bottleneck. Its engine shrieked momentarily, sputtered and died. I stared up at the rapidly dulling headlights, as bits of sensation returned to my extremities. Ages passed. When I finally managed to gain my knees, the world was in darkness. What was broken? Ribs, definitely. A sprained knee that swelled as I breathed. Possibly a bone in my back had snapped; insufficient to immobilize me, yet neither could I straighten fully. Cuts on my face and hands. The pain was minor, and that worried me. Why not worse? I had landed in deep, spongy moss, was nearly buried from the impact. It sucked at me as I clambered to solid footing.

The darkness wasn't complete. Aqueous light leaked from slimy surfaces, the low ceiling of sweating rock. As my vision adjusted I saw moss claimed everything. Stinking moss filled crevices and fissures, was habitat of beetles and other things. Sloppy from the eternal drip of water, it squelched between my toes, sucked my ankles. This was a relatively small cave, with a single chimney jammed by the crashed truck. This wasn't a mine shaft; my animal self was positive about that. Nor did it require much heavy thinking to conclude that climbing out of there was impossible. I couldn't raise my left arm above waist level. A single note from the panpipe came faintly. From below. A voice may have murmured my name—I was gasping too loudly and it did not repeat.

A fissure split the rear of the cave, a cramped tunnel descended. Mastering my instincts, I followed it down. The cool air warmed, was soon moist as a panting mouth. Pungent odors clogged my nostrils, watered my eyes.

Gradually, the passage widened, opening into a larger area, a cavern of great dimensions. The light strengthened, or my eyes got better, because pieces of the cavern joined as Mrs. Chin's photos had joined. And I beheld *Imago*.

Here was the threshold of the Beginning and End.

The roof was invisible but for the tips of gargantuan stalactites, all else shrouded. Moss, more moss, a garden, a forest of moss. But was it moss? I doubted that. Moss didn't quiver where it met flesh, didn't contract as a muscle contracts.

The walls glistened; they glowed not unlike the glow which seeped from Thornton's skin. Shadows of the world dwelt in the walls. Those most familiar to me rose from the depths like champagne bubbles. I passed Teddy's yacht near the surface, its lines quite clean despite being encased. Further along, a seaplane was suspended on high, partially obscured by gloom. It hung, fossilized, an inverted crucifix. There were faces, a frieze of ghastly spectators massed in the tiers of an amphitheater. I averted my gaze, afraid of who I might see pithed in the bell jar. Deeper, inside folds of rock that was not rock, were glimpses of Things to Come. Houses, onion domes and turrets, utopian skylines, the graceful arcs of bridges, rainforests and jagged mountains. And deeper, deeper yet, solar systems of pregnant globes of smothered dirt and vine, and charred stars in endless procession.

I caught myself humming The Doors' "This Is the End." I stood upon a shattered slope, weeping and laughing, and humming the song of death. Thinking probably the same thoughts any lesser primate does when confronted with apocalyptic forces. To these I added, *Damn you, anyway, Jacob! You can shove this favor in your big, flabby ass!* And, *I wonder if Carol is feeding the fish?*

Before me lay the cavern's boundary; another translucent wall. This area was subtly different, it bulged with murky reefs of dubious matter—I conjured the image of coiled organs, the calcified ganglia of some Biblical colossus. Dead roots snaked from an abyss to end abysses—a primordial sea from which all life had been egurgitated. My ears popped with a sudden pressure change. I detected movement.

I tried to run, but my legs were unresponsive, as if they had fallen asleep, and the moss shifted beneath my nerveless feet, dumped me on my backside. I flailed down the slope, which I realized was a funnel, or a trough. This occurred with excruciating slowness, but it was impossible to halt my weight once it got moving. Wherever my skin made contact with the moss I lost sensation. This was because the moss that was not moss stung with tiny barbs, stung me as a jellyfish stings. My legs, my back, right hand, then left, until everything from the neck down was anesthetized.

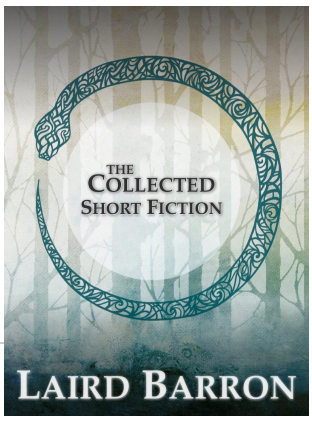
At the bottom, by some trick of geometry, I pitched forward to lie spread eagle against the curve of the wall. The rock softened, was vaguely gelatinous. I began to sink. Despite my numbed state, it was cold compared to the rank jungle of a cavern. Frigid.

As I sank, I thought, *Not a wall, a membrane*. Engulfed in amber jelly, tremendous pressure built upon my body, flattened my features. Wrenching my head to free it from imminent suffocation, to scream as an animal screams, dying alone in the wilderness, I saw a blossom of fire in the near distance. An abrupt blue-white flare that seemed to expand forever, then shrink into itself. I opened my mouth, opened my mouth—

The second flash was far smaller, far more remote. It faded swiftly.

I don’t know if there was a third.

Parallax



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EXCERPTED FROM NEWS 6 COVERAGE OF JACK CARSON BRIEFING (by Ron Jones —6/6/99):

JC: …and thank you to all the people involved in the search. The Olympia Police Department, the fire department, the Washington Highway Patrol, all the volunteers. The media. You've worked tirelessly to bring Miranda back to us safe and sound. Thank you.

RJ: Is there anything you would care to add, Mr. Carson?

JC: Yes. Miranda, honey. I love you. Please come home.

I see Miranda in the endless chain of faces.

After six years they're all starting to resemble her. Which is kind of funny since I often forget what she looks like until I spot her on a bus; in line at the bank; at a sidewalk café, scanning the *Daily O*, a Rottweiler at her feet, and wham. My heart knocks, my hands shake as if I quit the sauce only yesterday.

Six years, already?

Six years and I still can't touch Crown Royal, can't stomach the diesel taint. Six years and I hate the sound of ice slurring in a glass: makes me flinch and resurrects an image of icebergs in miniature on slate. I'm done with ice cubes, iceboxes, all of it. Sometimes I don't brave the kitchen for weeks.

Six years as of Saturday. Saturday Marchland pays a visit. He barges into the house, drunk and alone. They kicked him off the force, I don't recall

when. The brute has time to kill. Crosses my mind it's *me* he's come to kill after the pussyfooting around. That thought is a catalyst. It starts the cookie crumbling.

What's he waiting for, for Christ's sake? That's easy. He's been waiting for the coroner's report to confirm his suspicions about the body they found near Yelm six months ago. It's not that the deadly dull pathologists have a flair for the dramatic as much as there's a logjam at the forensics lab. Government cutbacks are a real bitch.

Six months, six years, six bullets in a .38 revolver. Marchland wants to be certain; of course he does. They confiscated his gun along with the badge, but that's not a problem; he got another piece at the pawn shop. He showed me once.

I ask how his partner Fisher is doing. Nothing doing.

Marchland lumbers to my liquor cabinet, grabs a dusty bottle of the best. He says to me, "Happy anniversary, Jack." Then he knocks back his whiskey and slops another. He trembles as he swallows, shudders like it's poison going down the hatch. His tics pronounce themselves most eloquently. His left eye is an agate. The right eye, the good eye, flickers like a shutter.

He's a wild boar, a crocodile, a basilisk. He smacks his lips as if he wishes it were my blood in his mouth.

Six years and Marchland won't quit. Good for him. I'm numb to his animal pathos. I've turned a stone ear to his dumb anguish. I'm tuned to the music of the stars, radio free Tau Ceti. No interest in act I of *Hamlet*. Let's jump to long knives and good-night speeches. Let's bring the curtain down already.

I turn away and stare through the window at the field where the scotch broom creeps yellow as hell toward my doorstep. Six years and it has advanced from the hinterlands to the picket fence in the back yard. Six more years and it will have chewed this house to the foundation, braided my bones in its hair.

I think nothing changes because thunderheads roll like wheels. I think of wheels in wheels, the threshing scythes in the hubs of clattering chariots, and I think hasn't this gone on long enough?

But Marchland doesn’t shoot me. He drains the tumbler, watches me watching the yellow field. When he leaves, he closes the door softly.

EXCERPTED FROM *THE MAKING OF ULTRAGOTHIC: BEHIND THE DOCUMENTARY.* INTERVIEW OF JUDITH PEIRCE (by William Tucker—3/19/02):

WT: What did you call your artist community—Penny Royal?

JP: That’s right.

WT: Kind of a traveling show.

JP: More of an artist support group that toured Europe. A networking project. We put on exhibitions.

WT: Who was involved?

JP: Oh, me and Jack. Freddy Snopes, Larry Torrence. Joe Adams—he went into computers, does fractal art. Miranda, of course. There were others; the group was pretty huge at times, but we were the core, the nucleus.

WT: There have been a lot of rumors about Penny Royal. Is it true that members of Penny Royal indulged in heavy drug use, attended orgies and held Satanic rituals?

JP: Satanic rituals?

Judy is ready to rumble.

It’s the same argument—the only argument—we ever have.

There are variations on the theme, but this is how it usually goes with Judy when she’s drunk enough or stoned enough to grab the bull by the horns. Tonight she’s both.

“Why do you stay, Jack? Why, in God’s name, do you stay in this house?” And believe me, she’s shrill when she’s in the mood. She’s got the cast-iron lungs of a professional activist, a cactus for a liver.

We've been friends since Cambridge. Since the magical, apocalyptic fairy-tale days of starving in exotic cities, sustained by youth, cheap grass and cheaper wine, the kindness of strangers. Suffering was beautiful then, as is any addiction at the threshold of the honeymoon bungalow. Judy was the den mother of our brood, a select confab of like-minded *artistes*. She was savagely glamorous in her impoverishment, fearless as a martyr. Attrition ground up and blew away our comrades; turned them into bankers and graphic designers, housewives with fruiting ovaries and dutiful husbands hanged by their own neckties. I would've gone down too, except she kept me treading water until Miranda and the Muses and Lady Luck carried me home.

Judy's suffering doesn't seem so hip anymore. That youthful euphoria has evaporated. Her lean, bronze face sags with the effects of too much too fast, changes as if a lamp had briefly illuminated the planes and creases. Sad, she looks horribly sad. Looks like she's been guzzling kerosene.

Thank God Judy is an old-school lesbian, else I'd be stuck on the notion she did away with Miranda to get with me. I almost ask her if she loved Miranda with the love that dare not speak its name. Almost, except that's the easy way out. And it's another question I probably don't want answered.

"I like my house. I'm attached to it," I say.

"Yeah, but, isn't it creepy?"

"Creepy? No." It is, indeed. Am I going to admit that?

She wags her head. "Hell yeah it's creepy. Only a psycho or a robot could sleep in this place knowing what you know. You act like a robot sometimes. Serious."

"Gee, thanks."

It's a really expensive house, a huge house with lots of artifacts cluttering the vaulted rooms, although none of the artifacts are mine. Correction, I kept one personal reminder of life with Miranda—a great ceramic bust of Achilles that I once hollowed in the throes of demonic possession or whatever it is the ancients took as the author of genius. This bust gapes from the window of my study. The old Greek's fractured skull is a palace for the silverfish, a repository of dust and dreams.

The remainder of my stuff has been reduced to splinters, ashes, pulverized. It took me three weeks to accomplish the feat. The big items went fast. The small items were tedious. I organized piles in the driveway, sat cross-legged as a swami, sorting them with maniacal devotion. I'd collected so many more things than seemed possible! The project was worth the effort, though. My wife's treasures deserve ample negative space.

I've converted my office into a gallery of Miranda's wax sculptures—the drowned woman; the cancer victim on the gurney we swiped from Saint Pete's; the seagull mobile; the Native American-style death masque in the window; a basket of petrified apples and pears oozing beneath a glaze of paraffin; a fruit fly graveyard in the embalming oils. These remnants of her portfolio, these fragments I have gathered to my breast, are a paean to her gothic sensibilities.

Everything is heavy or awkward or fragile. The notion of touching any of it makes me nauseous. I framed the article in *Smithsonian*, the one with the picture of her at the fabled museum accepting a pile of grant cash and a handshake from some fossil in a suit. I don't look at it much because it makes me nauseous too.

Then there's the Norman Rockwell yard, and the Norman Rockwell field, and those trees could've been painted by him as well. Everything turns green and red this time of year. It's a postcard outside my window.

I say, "Where am I supposed to go? Even psycho robots gotta sleep."

"You're loaded; you could go anywhere. Buy an island, become dictator of a banana republic, whatever, man. The only decent thing to do is burn it to the ground, blow it to hell and gone. Donate it, turn it into a fawkin' museum and sell tickets, whatever. Your call, Jack."

I sip my off-brand cola and force a smile. "I'm not loaded—you are."

"Ha, ha."

"But see, I can't leave."

"Why can't you?"

"What if she comes back?"

"Here we go. Here we fawkin' go. I need some more booze. Fast."

"What if she does?"

“Jack.”

“What if the old girl strolls through the door one day with an explanation for everything?”

“Jack—”

“‘Hi, baby, sorry I’m late, I was abducted by the Greys’; or, ‘holy shit, you wouldn’t believe the line at Wal-Mart—’”

“Jack. Jack, for Chrissake… She wouldn’t shop at Wal-Mart and she isn’t going to come back. You gotta sell this house and move on. Serious. You aren’t well, buddy. Uh, uh.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Jack—”

“Judy, no.”

“Ja-ack.” Her voice cracks to pieces at this point.

I just sip my cola and wait for the storm to break.

“Yes, you can. Jack, man. Why can’t you?”

I won’t tell Judy the reason, the honest-to-Betsy reason. I won’t tell her I wake up every other night with an iron band around my chest, bad dreams rattling in my attic. I wake up like a beast in the woods that’s scented something it can’t quite identify. I wake up with this premonition, as if any second now I’m going to receive the ultimate clue, that I’m finally going to find out what happened to my wife. Like the end of the cliffhanger serial is one commercial break away.

Instead, I tell Judy to have another snort and wipe her nose, because she’s bawling into her gin and tonic. We don’t discuss the fact the cops might be watching me again, that the phone is probably tapped and God knows what’s coming next.

I change the subject to sports, the weather.

EXCERPTED FROM THE *ALAMOGORDO DAILY TELEGRAPH* (6/9/87):

HONEYMOON COUPLE FOUND SAFE—Jack and Miranda Carson, presumed missing since their rental car was reported abandoned on Highway 70 near the White Sands National Monument on June 6, were found Tuesday at the Diamond Inn Resort. The resort is located 150 miles west of White Sands.

Mr. Carson, an acclaimed modern artist from Olympia, Washington, expressed surprise at being the subject of a missing persons report. “We’re not missing, we’re on our honeymoon!” Mr. Carson said. It was his opinion that the vehicle had been stolen and he had neglected to note its absence.

Further confusion arose from the fact that the Carsons signed the Diamond Inn register on June 8, prompting the Otero County Sheriff’s Office to question the couple’s whereabouts during the preceding thirty-six to forty-two hours. Mr. Carson, known for his flamboyant promotional style, denied any involvement in a publicity hoax, saying, “Publicity? Why would I want publicity on my honeymoon? We’ve been in our room or at the bar since we got here.”

Patty Angstrom, spokesperson for the Sheriff’s Office, declined comment pending further investigation.

Sunday is a coma. Sunday’s dreamscape is a long, pale sweep of desert.

My dreams are cinematic and exaggerated as spaghetti westerns. A lopsided *V* of Search & Rescue choppers crawls along the horizon. Mountains are jagged teeth of a cannibal cowboy. The wind hums the hum of bees in bleached skull hives; a discordant harmonica tune.

A plastic hand claws from the earth, the hand of a mannequin severed at the wrist. It’s feminine, and the ring on its finger is the ring I gave Miranda, the one from the flea market in New Mexico, not far from some proving grounds we read about in a tacky brochure. The ring matches the one she gave me.

Mesas and dunes blur, ruinous Luna gapes as the sun founders in her wake.

Home again. Miranda on the living room sofa. She's wearing my ancient rugby sweater; her brown hair's a glorious mess. She's daubing her nails and humming that old Sinatra song we first danced to in the Cloud Room. The light collects on her shoulder. I kiss her and walk through the door to the kitchen, try not to stumble. I drag my black double like a wrecking ball.

I'm fixing drinks; hair of the dog that bit us. I'm chopping at an ice block, trying not to botch the job, because my belly is queasy and the gong in my skull makes it tricky to concentrate.

The ice pick falls from my hand, rocks in a semicircle on the counter. The ice becomes a white-gold lake. The numbers on the microwave flicker forward two minutes. White light pours into my eyes. My head erupts.

No OFF button. I know this is only a movie, but I'm buckled to the theater seat. Once it starts, it won't stop; the hits keep on coming. The memory of the event is like a splash of indelible ink, a bloodstain.

Cicadas chirr in the flowerbox. An unseasonably crisp breeze pushes the tall grass. Sparks gather in black-hearted clouds. The stink of fire. Then silence. Miranda isn't humming, isn't making any sound. The only noise is the soft gasp of air forced through a vent near my feet. And something else, something vast and running on a frequency that scrambles the neurons in my brain. My personal supernova.

Then it's night. Gauzy, crystal-studded, immense.

I'm behind the wheel of a speeding luxury car—leather interior, power everything. Miranda's riding shotgun, sipping Bacardi and trailing her arm out the window, laughing. Gods, what a sweet sound; it sends an electric spike through me, curls my toes. We're on the road to Vegas. Ricardo Montalbán's disembodied voice congratulates my excellent taste in driving machines and women. The car isn't moving, it's at full stop. There's a big exit hole in the windshield. Vacuum moans as it sucks away the atmosphere, pulls my smile into a stroke victim's grimace.

The harmonica keens and Miranda's missing again.

I float up from the abyss, regard her side of the bed. Her pillow is drenched crimson by radio-clock light. You'd think I'd wake screaming, except that's fiction. Shaking, sweating, blinded by rocketing blood pressure, yes. But no screaming.

Why should I? It's utter phantasmagoria, anyway. I've never been in a car crash, never owned a car that plush, never had such a desire. A road trip to Vegas? New Mexico was desert enough for me.

We got married in a historic trading post. Or in a cathedral by a priest named Dominic. Doves floating; Miranda's white train dragging in the good clean Catholic dust.

Which was it?

There was that ordained minister and his wife who stayed in the room across the way at the resort. We played golf once; backgammon, something. He'd offered to marry us in the chapel or the Cloud Room, hadn't he? Damn—I don't remember at the moment and the moment is slipping away.

I stumble into the bathroom.

Water circles in the toilet. The stars march circles in a wedge of pebbled glass. They never seem quite right anymore. They hang differently from when Miranda and I used to lay on a blanket and do the romantic thing where you count them. They don't seem very romantic now.

I peer into the gloom of the yard, through the tall trees and taller shadows. A truck that resembles Marchland's flatbed Ford is parked at the end of the driveway. Like the Flying Dutchman, it materializes in that spot when I least expect. It's been there on and off for months, for ages. The dome light silhouettes Marchland's torso, his massive head.

Perhaps I should offer him a nightcap, or a cup of tea. There's lots of Miranda's herbal tea leftover in the pantry. Never been much of a tea man, myself.

I drop the blinds, return to bed.

On Monday I'm among my people.

Judy has the studio unlocked and the lights burning when I arrive with Kern. Judy warns me that someone has left twenty-or so hang-ups on the machine over the weekend. The *Seattle Post Intelligencer* wants to do an interview. A friendly retrospective. There have been no anonymous death threats for going on a year; that's a record. Miranda's mom died of cancer a while back. Her dad got himself killed on a ski slope in Italy and maybe that explains the drought. Why the hell does a retiree need to take up skiing

anyway? My largesse is the culprit—after I got famous we sent scads of cash to Miranda's parents. Getting rich late in life would do in just about anyone.

If Judy is the long-suffering Kato to my Green Hornet, Kern is my evil apprentice who longs to usurp my title as art world wunderkind. He's a brilliant conniver, bound for glory. They love each other a few degrees shy of homicide.

Kern met me at the China Clipper for breakfast and we talked about the Seattle exhibition upcoming next month. Kern did the talking. Can't say I heard much of it—hope I bobbed my head in the right places.

The exhibition is of tremendous importance to Kern—it's his chance to hob-nob with future patrons. We've got well-heeled boys and girls from New York, San Francisco and Chicago on the guest list.

I drift. The bulky pieces are done and packed up for shipment. My mind is free to spiral into its pit.

Kern doesn't fathom my indifference to the minutia. Once, I was the king of flash. I paid for rock bands and fireworks, bought ad space in the *New York Times*, made a spectacle of myself on network television; choked smug journalists with my bare hands; whatever it took to spread the word. He can't grasp this fundamental shift. He's also my disciple and his disapproval remains oblique. Plus, I've loaned him three hundred dollars and my old Datsun. Kern's got a big mouth and a canary ass. This proved to be an unfortunate combination when he swaggered into the local watering hole one fateful Western Swing Night. The local bullyboys totaled Kern's Volkswagen and went to work on him. An overhand blow from an aluminum bat spoiled his designer-model looks just a tad, and he's been humble pie since.

I won't lift a finger today.

Judy handles the bills and the maintenance people, coordinates with the lawyers and the galleries, keeps my head screwed on straight. She's a champ. Kern sweats the details in the forges.

I gnaw my nails, stare at the poster board with the billion memos, the press clippings curled as dried leaves. My eye is dragged to a photo of me and Miranda holding hands beneath the ceramic colossus of Achilles I erected in

Pioneer Square. I've just won the bet between us about who'd hit the jackpot first, but we're smiling. Miranda didn't have it in her to be bitter. That statue bought me a ticket to ride, as the boys from Liverpool said. We appear insignificant in its shadow.

Coffee rings and ink drippings mar the draft book near my left hand; fishhook doodles, random letters that have nearly eaten through the paper, the number 6 and the words ORDO TEMPLI ORIENTIS; PARALLAX; MIRANDA. No designs, however. I haven't managed a real design since *Achilles*, and if not for stamping my name on Kern's drawings I'd be staring down the barrel of artistic obscurity.

Kern and Judy don't want me to wither on the vine. I'm the franchise, the label on the jar that seals the deal. If I go down, Judy may as well start hunting for secretarial positions and Kern will be shaking his ass for dollars at the Long Horn Lounge.

Inertia takes me in its jaws, pads outside this cement igloo, strands me in the middle of the parking lot. Truthfully, I am waiting for Marchland to come and maintain his customary vigil, the police-drama surveillance he obviously took to heart back in the academy. I do this every morning, although today is the first time in a great while that I have admitted as much to myself.

I gaze down the hill across the bridge at Olympia, its crescent of waterfront warehouses and high-tension wires giving way at the center to clumps of brownstones and hoary maples. Yeah, there's a few trees over there, they haven't hacked down the last of them yet.

I want to smoke, but I gave up smoking when I kicked the hooch. Since Miranda's disappearance, the simple expedient has been to deny myself all semblance of pleasure—as if dogged asceticism will pull the picture into focus, will pay off the vengeful fortune teller.

The neon marquee of the Samovar Inn fizzes to gray.

The last time I had sex was in that very hotel: room 6. That was something on the order of a year ago. The woman wasn't my wife, obviously, and I'd wondered beforehand, as I folded my clothes and drank tap water because my mouth was too dry, if this made me an adulterer. I wasn't driven by physical need. Biological imperatives had been submerged long before the

Samovar rendezvous. Polar caps cover that territory. I obeyed the impulse to plummet from a high place, the impulse that quickens when we gaze over the edge of a cliff. I'd wanted to prove at least one of the theories about my character. I wanted to send this train off the tracks, just to watch the wreck.

The girl I met at the hotel was named Gina, or Jenna, something with a soft *g*. Her hair was brown, just like Miranda's; she was an art student too, knew the book on me front and back. I can't remember much about her, except she wore sandals and purple eyeliner. She is a ghost among the throng of ghosts I seem to be collecting.

I wonder how Gina, or whoever she is, is doing. Has anybody seen her since then? This is how I indulge my latent masochism—entertaining macabre lines of thought, speculating about blackouts, schizophrenia, mysterious gaps in time. I'm into self-mutilation in a big way.

Judy is of that opinion.

Judy says so during our weekly conclaves at the Millstone when we sneak away and leave Kern to his machinations. Judy says it without opening her mouth—it's in her expression as she casually lines up the eight ball, the way she studies her toothpick after steak and red wine, or when she's chambering another round in her trusty Winchester rifle at the club.

Thing is, Judy's loyal. She doesn't care about finding the truth. She's the main reason I stopped seeing my psychiatrist and flushed the happy pills down the drain. Hell, I'd pretty much flushed everything else down there.

Too bad none of it is enough.

Marchland cruises by in his battered truck. He's wearing a ten-gallon hat, tinted glasses. He parks down the block where he can watch the studio from three directions, same as always.

Today is different. Today is the straw upon a mighty heap of straws. Today the straw has found a vein and the bad blood is rushing out.

I wave at him and begin walking across the lot, end up in my car before I formulate the intent to go anywhere. When I roll out and cruise north on Legion, my thoughts are flies buzzing in a bottle.

After the third traffic light I know.

EXCERPTED FROM *THE MAKING OF ULTRAGOTHIC: BEHIND THE DOCUMENTARY.* INTERVIEW WITH HOMICIDE DETECTIVE MARTIN FISHER (by William Tucker—4/4/02):

WT: During the timeframe of Mr. Carson's visit to Italy in 1983-84 how many women were reported missing?

MF: Approximately four. That's our best information.

WT: You contacted Interpol regarding Mr. Carson's activities in Europe…

MF: Uh, yes. In the process of investigating Miranda Carson's disappearance. Well, and the FBI kept a file on some of the members of Penny Royal. Uh, a couple of them had ties to ELF—

WT: Environmental Life Force. The so-called eco-terrorists. Saboteurs, not murderers…

MF: Yes, but it clarifies a pattern of behavior. These folks didn't necessarily mature with age. A couple were very sympathetic to ELF, and the Bureau shared information with us. There was also evidence that some of the members of Penny Royal dabbled in the occult. Mr. Carson corresponded with a former intimate of the late Aleister Crowley—one Mason Barnes. Mr. Barnes was an investment banker from Oakland, and a chapter leader of the Ordo Templi Orientis. He owned several properties in the United States and Europe and the Carsons were among those who availed themselves of Mr. Barnes' amenities on numerous occasions.

WT: Isn't it a fact that Mason Barnes and associates were instrumental in promoting Jack Carson's early work?

MF: Yes—that's correct. They financed him, arranged for an exclusive show in a major gallery. Launched him. Barnes went to prison in 1993 on multiple counts of extortion, kidnapping, sexual assault, and drug distribution. Whether Jack Carson was fully aware of Mr. Barnes' cult activity is unknown. Of course we looked at this in connection with the vanished women—and a possible motive for kidnapping or murder of Miranda Carson.

And, obviously, we pursued the Italian leads. But this didn't go anywhere.

WT: Why not?

MF: One of the missing women, a secretary at a utilities office in Palermo, was subsequently found to be living in Venezuela. Local authorities did not consider foul play a plausible concern regarding the other women. Interpol treated it as a closed case.

WT: The local investigators declined to reopen the case.

MF: They declined. There simply wasn't enough to go on.

WT: Were the other three women ever located?

MF: No, they were not.

Whenever I think about That Day the images spill forth like negatives on a reel, like my guts coiling around my throat. The first thing I always remember is the migraine.

I hadn't been hit with a migraine since my college years. Those were humdingers, though—real knuckle-whiteners. The kind that bring tears to your eyes, bring up your lunch. The kind that can put you on your knees whimpering for God, mom, or whoever will listen. I'd almost forgotten.

This one wasn't like those. This was worse, and it came with special effects.

There I was, chopping ice in the kitchen. The migraine slammed me behind my left eye. I thought I'd been stabbed. Vertigo staggered me, and I dropped the ice pick and clutched my head. White light flooded through the multiplying windows. White light hit me in a wave and then receded and shrank, left me blinking at fractured afterimages. The kitchen door divided into a paper chain of kitchen doors and wrapped the bizarrely off-kilter room. Objects elongated and deformed and swapped places. This was a world made of warm taffy or the stuff inside a lava lamp. The worst of it was watching the scotch broom in the field cycle from yellow to white to black and back. The scotch broom undulated as if the field was a sea trough during a hurricane.

The sky shuddered and went white like an eye rolling up and back.

And then, everything was fine. Somebody released my skull from the vice. The scenery wobbled into place. I sagged against the counter, grateful the merry-go-round had let me off in one piece, that the vessels in my brain hadn't decided to rupture then and there. Just a migraine; not an aneurysm, not a stroke.

The merry-go-round hadn't stopped, though.

It took me a few moments to catch on, but I did soon enough. Silence spread like a riptide. Doom doesn't require fanfare when all it has to do is cup your balls and slowly squeeze. I got the message.

—Honey? Exactly like the movies. And, as in the movies, I tried again, poised at the lip of a chasm that widened with each synaptic detonation.

I searched everywhere. I tore the house to pieces.

The air was warm with her breath. Her perfume collided with particles of dust. She gazed from half a dozen photographs. We'd gone to the Capitol Theatre the night before, to catch the premiere of *Annie Get Your Gun*, and Miranda's stockings were draped across a chair in the bathroom. Her purse, her credit cards, her jewelry, her clothes, present and accounted—everything whole and untouched.

Every door was safely shut.

On the sofa by the window, I found a creased copy of *Ladies' Home Journal*. On the coffee table by the sofa, I found an open bottle of cherry nail polish and a brush. Three red droplets etched a crescent upon the coffee table glass. The fumes were strong.

It got dark. I never found her.

The cops came; took my picture, took my story. Took me apart.

Detective Marchland wrote in a ledger. He had thick, mason's fingers with dirt under the nails. He exuded a medieval tang, as if his rumpled suit should've been a leather apron soaked in hog blood.

Detective Fisher smiled hatefully as he picked up knickknacks, caressed the spines of our many books. A lanky man in a cheap suit, he was positively dapper next to his partner.

—Love your house, Mr. Carson. Throw parties here, do you?

My mind was in slowdown. My gray matter had been nearly suffocated in the first hours of panic.

—Parties?

—We hear you have some real shindigs, Detective Marchland said. He kept scribbling and I realized that neither of them was exactly looking me in the eye.

—Lotta drugs at these parties, Mr. Carson? I bet there are.

—You can tell us, Detective Fisher said, weighing a musty copy of *The Decameron* in his palm.

—She just… vanished, you say? Poof, like that? Left everything she owns. Maybe somebody took her, you think?

—Know who might want to take your wife, Mr. Carson? Anybody asking for money, that sort of thing? You see, sir, people don't just disappear. Usually there's a reason. Sometimes they have help.

I understood where this was headed, could see them placing the dynamite, the blasting caps.

Parties? Oh my, yes. After *Achilles* we'd gone wild. Three-day parties, two hundred-car parties. Big bands, boom boxes, dj's, drug dealers, and hip-hop gangstas. Rock stars, track stars, porn stars. Limousine loads of them. We'd run the gamut, we'd done it up right. Most of it a bright, blobby fuse that I'd relegated to the trunk of ancient history.

The cops kicked that trunk over and rummaged through the dirty linen with unrestrained glee. No patrons of the arts here. It didn't do them any good. They never found her either. However, they did find some bloody rags stuffed inside a coffee can in Miranda's studio. She'd cut her hand on a piece of scrap metal. Nothing sinister, boys.

Cue the trial of the new century.

During the trial of the new century I learned that Marchland slept with my future wife pretty much their entire senior year in high school. They'd even considered getting hitched. Talk about a surprise to the prosecution. We won't talk about what gastrointestinal effects the revelation had on me. For a micromoment I leaped to the inspiration it was him who'd done the deed.

He’d snuck into the house past the alarm, the locks, and two snoozing Rottweilers, chloroformed my beloved, kidnapped her under my nose. No go. The day Miranda disappeared, my rival, the ex-cop, was making the rounds with his partner.

Even so, Marchland’s omission of this prior relationship sank the prosecution. The trial quickly raveled into a small-town soap opera.

Thank goodness for that—it’s what eventually saved me from a prolonged stay at the crossbar hotel. It was the LAPD-O.J. Simpson fiasco all over again. Of course, that doesn’t shock, that part’s common knowledge. All of the dirt is in the public domain. Anybody who got CNN could keep score. There’s a DVD documentary at Blockbuster, and I hear the grad student who filmed it is the toast of Tinsel Town. He spliced bits of courtroom testimony with my prior appearances on the *Tonight Show* and *Oprah*. The kid even got his mitts on security camera footage from my midnight demolition of *Achilles* with a sledgehammer, the madcap foot pursuit and arrest. Yes indeed, that screaming face squashed against the cruiser’s window is mine.

Those prison-interview tapes are priceless. Good grief, I am positively scary in an orange jumpsuit. See me fidget, cast furtive glances at the cameraman with my slippery, Cro-Magnon eyes. And those questions. I love how they fire the questions.

—Are you guilty, Mr. Carson?

What they mean is, just admit it.

EXCERPTED FROM *THE MAKING OF ULTRAGOTHIC: BEHIND THE DOCUMENTARY.* INTERVIEW WITH FORMER HOMICIDE DETECTIVE KURT MARCHLAND (by William Tucker—4/12/02):

WT: Bundy. Ridgeway. Yates.

KM: (nods).

WT: Serial killers who stalked the Pacific Northwest.

KM: Yes.

WT: Washington State is a magnet for these guys, isn't it?

KM: Frankly, Bill, it… well, that's a myth. There's no link between geography and serial killers. Makes good copy, though.

WT: Bianchi, Russell, Dodd…

KM: Right. That's right.

WT: And of course, the ones we don't know about.

KM: (chuckles).

WT: Jack Carson?

KM: Jack Carson… I think so. Yes.

WT: But no proof. No body.

KM: The circumstantial evidence, the other incidents in the past. There's a history there. I mean, we found a lot of blood in that workshop.

WT: Would you characterize him as the one who got away?

KM: (long pause) I like to think… his day is coming.

WT: Some people have compared you with Mark Fuhrman.

KM: Yes.

WT: You've been criticized for… quote, "torpedoing" the Carson case.

KM: Yes.

WT: Is that fair?

KM: I made a mistake. My career was destroyed. The guy murdered his wife and walked. I paid for that mistake. I was ruined.

WT: A powerful indictment. He was found not-guilty, however.

KM: The jury was forced to disregard my testimony. It cast doubt on everything the prosecution had built.

WT: Because of a technicality. So, it was unfair.

KM: Ask Miranda Carson. Ask her about what's fair.

I drive deep into the country, past the dairy and the sod fields, past a busload of migrant laborers pulling weeds along the outer track; keep going until I cross an iron bridge with green moss eating alive the girders, and turn onto a rutted lane. Brush scrapes the door panels and squeaks against the windows. The claustrophobic lane opens into a valley of evergreens, none more than eight feet tall, the whole interlaced by dirt paths in the manner of a fishing net. I park on the ridge, get out and stretch my legs, inhale the musk of shorn fir boughs.

Miranda adored Schneider's Christmas Tree Farm. We brought the dogs here on many a lazy summer evening, let them careen after rabbits through the serried ranks of baby Douglas firs. I'd sit on the hood of our car, puffing a cigarette while the blue sky burnt to black. Miranda, she'd chase the dogs, snap pictures of birds with her disposable camera. Sometimes she'd find the carcass of a blue jay or a robin and wrap it in a kerchief, pack the smelly bundle home for one of her sculptures. Once, she created a wax mobile of decayed seagulls, showed it at a local art festival to the horror and consternation of our less cosmopolitan associates. Nobody ever expected a sweet, wholesome girl to possess such an edge.

When Marchland arrives he shuts off his engine and sits there until I begin to wonder if he will actually climb out and confront whatever it is I have in mind.

The sun hangs directly overhead.

"Don't be afraid," I say. I'm slumped against the bumper of my car. I'm thinking of nothing. I'm on autopilot. My mouth works and discharges a prerecorded message. "I figured this would be a good place. Surprised no one ever thought to look." I bare my teeth to really sell it. "Except somebody did finally look. That body they found—it was in a shallow grave about a mile from here. Rotted away to bone fragments and sinews. They know it's a woman, at least."

Marchland's face is hidden by the brim of his hat.

I plow on, jabbing the bee's nest. "What happened, Kurt? After high school, I mean. You weren't bright enough for the big leagues, were you, my friend?"

Marchland doesn't say anything. Doesn't have to.

“So, she bops off to college and meets me. Horror of horrors. I had drugs, talent, oodles of charisma. Means and opportunity. You were basically screwed. Life is unfair, eh? Course, this time we had us a twist ending—a little bitter-sweet vindication for the blue collar slob, isn’t that right?” Sure it is. My stalker is no man of mystery; I have become intimate with the squalid details of his wasted life—his lost love, stolen love, if one prefers; the procession of failed marriages; the ruined career, you name it.

Tit for tat.

I used to think Marchland’s rage was fueled by simple jealousy, by frustration and sorrow of this melancholy end to an adolescent romance. Now, I get the feeling things are way more complicated.

He carefully adjusts the wing mirror with a hand shaped for the handle of an axe. His knuckles are disfigured; they’ve been broken in saloon brawls, backroom interrogations. Still, he says nothing. Stewing.

I’m nodding, mesmerized by my own invention. I’m catching my stride. I stand between the vehicles, my legs bowed like a gunfighter bracing to slap leather. “Yeah, you were right. You, your partner, the media ghouls. I’m fucking guilty. Haven’t you always known that? Problem is, you’re a coward.” Is it true? Even I don’t know anymore what it is I have or haven’t done. The crush of popular opinion has asserted its peculiar laws upon me.

Marchland caresses the mirror, runs his thumb back and forth as if he’s testing the edge of a knife, as if he’s searching for a pulse.

I curse him then. I scream at him with such fierceness my throat constricts and my eyeballs quiver. Profanities, accusations, a stream of vitriolic gibberish that doesn’t sound a bit like me. Hoarse and shaken, I deliver the *coup de grâce*, “She never mentioned you. Ever.” I show him a zero with thumb and forefinger. I wait and wait and nothing happens except the trees stir and dust settles. Then I get into my car and drive away. Marchland doesn’t give chase, doesn’t do anything except sit dead in the road. His truck dwindles and is lost when I round the bend.

I’m jacked to the gills on nature’s fight or flight chemicals. I can’t see straight; the scenery jitters. Phantom trees, pale disc of sun, the gravel road a molted snake-skin beneath these tires. None of it solid, none of it

substantial, two-dimensional flatness to every angle, every blurred outline washed in polychromatic glare.

Cramps lock my fingers on the wheel; my tongue is too fat. I might as well have stared down the drain pipe of a gun, the way my body throbs in the aftermath. I don't know what to do with myself; I hadn't planned this far ahead.

What did I expect, anyway? That if only I pushed enough buttons Marchland would explode like Krakatoa, put a bullet in my brain? Or maybe that wasn't the point of this exercise. Maybe I wanted to sting him like I was stung when they dropped the bomb on me during the trial. Maybe revenge is all this was and the rest could be filed under minor details.

I swing onto the blacktop, get almost to the moss-encrusted bridge when the grille of Marchland's Ford rushes in, fills my rearview mirror.

Clank.

Many moons before the D.A. decided The People had a case, I hired this private eye to look into things. Naturally, public opinion was I only did it to clear my name. To that I say, well, hell, at least I wasn't cooling my heels on a golf course.

Money was easy, I hired the best I could find. Lance Pride, owner-operator of the Pride Agency. I could have gone bigger, could have gone to one of those corporate outfits with international connections, two hundred agents on the ground kicking trashcans, crunching data. The fact I went small and local wasn't lost on my detractors. To them, the vocal majority, it simply demonstrated a token effort, a face-saving maneuver. Demonstrated that I knew the whole search was a farce.

They were right, if for the wrong reasons. A buddy of mine named Marvin Cortez, a strong-arm guy who memorized Plato and Machiavelli, once hypothesized the universe is comprised of nothing more, nothing less than information, that the Kabbalists are on the money with their tetragrams and all that other esoteric magic square shit—the meaning of everything is in a lost equation. Miranda wasn't missing; she'd been subtracted, swallowed whole by some quantum boa constrictor.

I went to Pride because Pride was a bloodhound and because Pride was a checkered-past fellow and he promised to help me put holes in the

sonofabitch who kidnapped Miranda—if there *was* a sonofabitch. He couldn't dismiss the possibility she'd decided to take a powder. People bailed on their lives by the thousands, every year. My chums the homicide dicks could attest that tons of missing persons weren't missing, they were on the lam from abusive spouses, debts, their humdrum routines.

Miranda wouldn't have bailed. Abandoned her mom and dad and beloved older brother who was a dentist with three kids that called her auntie and begged to visit our lovely country home every time we saw them. She wouldn't have left me hung out to dry, facing a murder rap. Miranda wouldn't do that, no way.

Then what of those photos from an airport in South America, about eight months after her disappearance? The picture of a woman in a flower-print dress going through customs. Hard to tell with the fugitive-from-Hollywood glasses and the hat and all, but that woman sure looked a lot like Miranda. Surely did indeed. Too bad the mystery woman melted into the great, old continent before anybody could ask her some questions.

It went like that for years. Periodically there'd be a Miranda sighting—a tourist in Delhi, a face in a train window, a grainy still from some camera in some Midwest department store, a blurry image in a crowd of a back-page newspaper story. Tips—ah, all those anonymous tips. I kept a file cabinet just for the letters and emails. Pride received hundreds of phone calls, and I guess the police did too. I had to guess because they didn't talk to me.

Most of it was garbage, easy to see it was garbage. Even in my state of mind I saw through it. Occasionally though, once in a blue moon, as they say, Pride handed me a picture and my pulse would stutter—because it was her staring back at me. The name would be wrong, the hair different, the face older, but unmistakably hers. Twice, Pride bought tickets and flew with me to the places these photos had been taken.

First we visited a town in the rust belt, had a chat with a woman who called herself Macy and worked in a five and dime. Macy drawled, seemed functionally illiterate and was completely charming, guileless as a kitten.

Second time it was a suburban housewife in Oregon who drove a mammoth SUV and had four kids. This one was married to the local high school

softball coach. Not so charming, not so guileless, and not the woman I married—metaphorically or otherwise.

Neither of the women knew me, although when they put two and two together, that I was that *other* infamous uxoricidal brute loose for lack of evidence, their eyes turned into saucers. If either was Miranda gone underground, she should've won an Academy Award.

They weren't actresses. They were a couple of people with a fluke resemblance to my wife and that was that. Everybody has a twin, out there in the world, a doppelgänger. The beat went on.

After a while, a long while, even Pride threw in the towel, left me to chase the next fata morgana on my own. He begged off on our business lunches, became too busy to return my calls, eventually stopped cashing my checks. By the end I think he was wondering about me, wondering if I had somehow fooled him. Bundy fooled Anne Rule, he surely did. There was a precedent. I think Pride worried the rest of the world knew something he didn't.

That made two of us.

EXCERPTED FROM THE JOURNAL OF INMATE XX-201957. LOCATION, WASHINGTON STATE CORRECTIONAL FACILITY (7/13/2013):

You never would've caught me.

i was bored. So i stopped. Stopped taking precautions, stopped covering my tracks. Don't think you're clever.

You should've seen your faces.

If they mean to stick me with the needle in the morning, guess i can come clean and tell the truth. Sing for my last supper.

Who tells the truth and nothing but the truth, so help them GOD? People who think GOD's watching the show, that He's got His Hand on the switch, that's who. The truth is fine, a ripping yarn is better. Assholes who wrote the Holy Book knew that everybody is looking for a good read.

Bugs, mongrel puppies, teenage prostitutes. GOD don’t seem to give a goddamn about none of them. Folks say you were a COP how could you? i say there is no such thing.

Folks ask me how many, how many, really? Did you take that one, and it’s the famous one they mean. My smile may seem sly, but it’s not sly it’s patronizing. Only a fool hears a line like “bugs, mongrel puppies, and teenage prostitutes” and assumes one thing naturally leads to another.

MIRANDA wasn’t a whore, now was she? She’s disqualified. i was in the office with a dozen witnesses the day she went the way of joseph force crater. Do your homework. Do your damn math.

Besides, i picked up the hobby later in life. Didn’t even start until i left the department, my third divorce. Sour days, baby. i needed something to keep my hands busy.

carson’s the one to ask. i always said so and i still do. That sneaky sonofabitch. Takes one to know one. Those college girls in france and italy, the ones who vanished while he was doing his backpack tour of europe. Coincidence? You all love coincidences, don’t you? That girl who washed out of evergreen and then dropped off the planet, i hear he banged her. Quite the grieving widower, ain’t he? Know what i think? i think he was a no-talent trust fund hippie who married better than he deserved. i think he sold his soul to rock n’ roll and one day the Devil called in the marker.

Face it, boys—when it comes to women that bastard is the bermuda triangle.

Wheels turn. Stop.

Heads turn.

Miranda has just entered the Cloud Room to the muted strains of “That Old Black Magic” and she’s decked out in her elegant but provocative red dress, the strapless number that smashes my rational side to jelly. She takes my hand and we start to dance by the light of the full moon, a glitter ball.

The glitter ball, a globe of pale fire, flickers, strobes, incandesces.

Judy blinks into existence and says, “Why were you out there, Jack?”

No Cloud Room. I’m in a bed and the walls are close. Stark green walls. Coffin walls.

Of course, what I hear first is, “Why’d you kill her, Jack?” I’m thinking “*Et tu, Brute?”*, before the truth registers in the low, awful chord of a bag pipe dirge.

The room darkens, a noose constricts around us and Judy’s sad, florid face wavers in the candle flicker, recedes down a long, flexible tunnel—a ventilation tube. Her lips move and I think she needs to speak up because she sounds like the ocean in a sea shell.

Oh, right. The tree. I hit the tree, or the tree hit me. I drove off the shoulder and rammed a monster oak near a pasture. Cows chewing, vacuously watching me bleed, the car burn.

Judy wavers, disintegrates.

A man in white enters the frame, says a few words, mostly unintelligible, and shines a light in my eyes. I do catch the word *coma* and something about cerebral hemorrhaging. Guy must be a doctor. About the second I figure this out, he’s warped off into the fuzzy nimbus at the edge of my vision.

“How ya doin’, Michelangelo?” This from the doctor’s replacement, a haggard man with a bleach-blond mustache. This isn’t a state trooper, or an Olympia traffic cop, no sir. It’s my long lost pal Detective Fisher hoping for a deathbed confession. Homicide dicks need hope too—it’s no secret they’re just janitors with gold badges.

The detective looks awful in the sunlight leaking through the window slot. He’s aged these past six years. Not quite so poorly as Marchland, but poorly enough I’d almost pity him if I didn’t despise California beach boys with such profound intensity. I’d bet dollars to doughnuts the sorry jerk keeps a surfboard stashed in the closet, Sex Waxed and ready to go.

We don’t get do-overs on those Halcyon Days; Fisher won’t be hanging ten anytime soon, won’t be doing the lambada with Annette Funicello. He’s been hitting the bottle and the bottle has been counterpunching. He reaches

down to smooth my blanket and a wedding band catches the light. His touch is gentle, as if I'm a sick child.

When Fisher speaks I'm distracted by the shimmer of his ring, his cellophane-flesh, the teletype scrawl moving across his brow, the hollows of his cheeks. He was fresh when he'd been attached to the first Green River Killer task force, eons ago. The task force that never actually caught anyone. A John Wayne wannabe made the collar, swilled up the glory and wrote a bestseller during the fifteen-minute joyride. Ran for Congress; the works. Some cops always get their man. Some never do.

"Sod farmer pulled you out. Saved your ass. What's left of it."

I can't talk, not with the respirator and the tubes, but I'm beginning to see the shape of things through the lifting fog. I recall a stranger in a plaid coat, his hands passing before my eyes, falling upon my shoulders. Trees and greasy clouds switch places. The burning car, the placid cows. And the stranger's wizened face swinging over mine in low orbit. Takes me a moment to decipher what he says. He mouths, *Killer.* Then his face becomes insubstantial, its atoms fracture to the four corners. The press and thump of machinery, the glint of Fisher's ring fill the margins.

Fisher is still here, digging in. "They say you're done. I can hardly buy that until I see it. Guys like you don't stop ticking until the warden turns on the gas, do they, Jack?"

Obviously Detective Fisher hasn't abandoned his pet theory. He'd been superb as a witness for the state, desperate not to let another maniac slip through his clutches. Not so down in the heel back then, either; charming as a snake-oil salesman, Fisher dressed the part of an Ivy Leaguer even if the farthest east he'd ever been was LA. Few things are more compelling than a handsome cop in a crisp suit pointing a steady finger at a prisoner wearing shackles.

Ah, if they could see him now.

Fisher says, "Even if you do squeak through, I don't guess you're gonna be walkin' around much. Not gonna be climbin' around any scaffolds, either. You can get yourself one of those deluxe rigs with the hydraulics and all that. Oxygen tanks strapped to the back. A hefty male nurse to change your diapers. Maybe do some whittlin' in your chair." He seems well-pleased at

my evident paraplegia, and I don't blame him. If the best revenge is living well, second best has to be watching your enemy shrivel like a worm on the end of a hook.

"Damned tragedy, you getting in a car crash after losing your wife and all. I bet you were crying your eyes out to Hank Williams or somethin'—didn't see the curve until it was too late. Damned tragedy." He shakes his head. "Oh, I noticed a dent in your bumper. Was that paint from another car? Guess you backed into somebody and didn't report the accident. No worries. Olympia PD has better things to do than hassle you on a misdemeanor hit-and-run beef. I put in a good word for you."

The doctor appears from stage left. He taps Fisher on the shoulder and harangues him in Esperanto or Cantonese. Fisher laughs the good-natured laugh of a career cynic, raises his palms to ward invisible blows. He pauses at the curtain, says, "Hey, we got the results on that Jane Doe. She's not a Jane Doe anymore. You busy sonofagun—we found a few of her friends. Made yourself a whore graveyard."

I'm getting sick to my stomach. I see the choppers, the hounds, burly men in windbreakers muttering into handsets. Not a desert in Nevada or New Mexico, but a green Pacific Northwest divide lumped with unmarked graves.

The burning car, the placid cows. Marchland observing his handiwork from the road. He tugs the brim of his hat to shade his Devil's face, although for a tick his face could've been anyone's, even mine.

A full tank of gas could've taken Marchland halfway to the moon. Or to a lonesome stretch of the I-5 Corridor where girls of all ages hawk their services along the archipelago of strip malls and truck stops, motels and casinos. A savage border where a grimy three-foot-high concrete buttress holds back the woods and the night.

I can't even twitch my fingers. Getting sleepy.

Fisher keeps talking, he's got a mouthful of static. My eyes close. I'm thinking of cats in boxes, radioactive elements, and one simple question. As long as the cat stays boxed the answer is maybe.

Violins and horns scratch my cerebrum, catch fire.

I’m dancing with Miranda under the glitter ball. The band has Old Blue Eyes down cold. If I don’t look at the detective, the song will go on and on, perhaps forever. If I don’t hear Fisher’s words Miranda and I can keep on dancing until the champagne runs dry and the ball dims to a cinder.

The glitter ball pulses. It’s the white exit of a black entrance, mouth of an event horizon, the hole at the heart of everything. In moments it has filled all space, has compressed all time to a point.

The possibilities are infinite.

This must be a seizure.

There is no warning. The pressure in the room changes.

The wallop of pain strikes her temple like a mallet, causes her to cease humming, to discard the nail brush, scattering droplets of cherry enamel, to curl in the center of the room, trembling. She has never heard of a seizure causing pain. There shouldn’t be pain. She can’t coordinate her thoughts to assail this incongruity and it circles down the drain.

The world falls silent. Dull light curdles against the window, foams in her hair, reveals her delicate skull inside translucent flesh, traces the kaleidoscope of veins and nerves. She struggles to her feet and gropes toward the kitchen like a drowning swimmer.

The great, physical silence throbs and builds. White light fuses her vision and then recedes like a wave. She sways before the kitchen door. But there are too many doors. They shift and flex. Light and dark flicker through them. The light and the dark are cold and vast and the room distends, balloon-like, beyond its natural circumference. The doors distend also. Vertigo begins to crush her spine. The room is an inescapable gravity well.

Then, it’s finished. The pain withdraws its hooks and clamps and leaves her shaken, but otherwise unmarked. She wipes her eyes and everything is restored to its proper place and perspective. Yet, yet, something has changed. The house is different now. An ant farm suddenly, terminally decolonized.

She finds the kitchen empty.

A block of ice in bits, drips, drips. The ice pick is balanced on the counter edge, its point a morning flame. The microwave clock nictitates

indecipherable fragments of numerals, of words, a dying signal.

She smells the musk of his aftershave, the warmth of his smoky exhalations yet hanging in a gulf of dust motes. It's as if he dropped through a sprung trap door.

She says, "Jack? Honey?"

Out there, the scotch broom nods, nods.

EXCERPTED FROM THE ACTION 9 COVERAGE OF MIRANDA CARSON BRIEFING (by Rod Jones—6/9/99):

MC: …and in closing I just want to thank everyone involved with the search for Jack. There are so many people who have given their time… I thank all of you for the cards and letters. It means so much to us.

And to whoever is holding my husband: please, let him come home. Take him to a hospital or a fire station. Please, from the bottom of my heart, I beg you to do the right thing. Please let Jack come home to his family. You have the power.

Jack, I love you. We won't stop looking.

Hallucigenia

This version taken from *The Imago Sequence and Other Stories*, 2007

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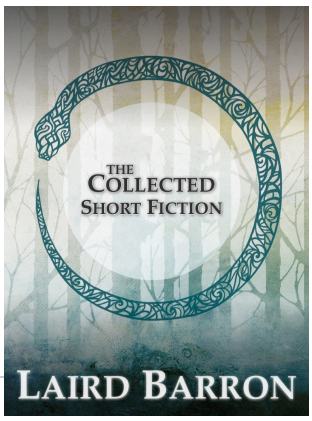

And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.
—Wallace Stevens

1

The Bentley nosed into the weeds along the shoulder of the road and died. No fuss, no rising steam, nothing. Just the tick, tick, tick of cooling metal, the abrupt silence of the car's occupants. Outside was the shimmering country road, a desolate field and a universe of humidity and suffocating heat.

Delaney was at the wheel, playing chauffeur for the Boss and the Boss' wife, Helen. He said to Helen, "She does this when it's hot. Vapor lock, probably." He yanked the lever, got out and lighted a cigarette. His greased crewcut, distorted by the curve of the windshield, ducked beneath the hood.

Helen twisted, smiled at Wallace. "Let's walk around." She waggled her camera and did the eyebrow thing.

"Who are you, Helmut Newton?" Wallace was frying in the backseat, sweating like a bull, khakis welded to his hocks, thinking maybe he had married an alien. His big, lumpen nose was peeling. He was cranky.

Fresh from Arizona, Helen loved the bloody heat; loved tramping in briars and blackberry tangles where there were no lurking scorpions or snakes. She was a dynamo. Meanwhile, Wallace suffered the inevitable lobster sunburns of his Irish heritage. Bugs were furiously attracted to him. Strange plants gave him rashes. He wondered how fate could be as sadistic to arrange such a pairing.

Maybe Dad had been right. When he received the news of the impending nuptials, Wallace's father had worn an expression of a man who has been stabbed in the back and was mostly pained by the fact his own son's hand gripped the dagger. Paxton women were off-limits! The families, though distanced by geography, were intertwined, dating back to when Dalton Smith and George Paxton served as officers during WWII. Dalton quailed at the very notion of his maverick sons mucking about with George's beloved granddaughter and obliterating a familial alliance decades in the forging. Well, maybe brother Payton could bag one, Payton was at least respectable, although that was hardly indemnity against foolishness—after all, *his* French actress was a neurotic mess. But Wallace? Out of the question entirely. Wallace Smith, eldest scion of the former senior senator of Washington State was modestly wealthy from birth by virtue of a trust fund and no mean allowance from his father. Wallace, while having no particular interest in amassing a fortune, had always rankled at the notion he was anything less than a self-made man and proved utterly ingenious in the wide world of high finance and speculation. He dabbled in an assortment of ventures, but made his killing in real estate development. Most of his investments occurred offshore in poor, Asian countries like Viet Nam and Thailand and Korea where dirt was cheap but not as cheap as the lives of peasant tenants who were inevitably dispossessed by their own hungry governments to make way for American-controlled shoe factories, four-star hotels and high-class casinos.

The trouble was, Wallace had been too successful too soon; he had lived the early life of any ten normal men. He had done the great white hunter bit in the heart of darkest Africa; had floated the Yellow River and hiked across the Gobi desert; climbed glaciers in Alaska and went skin diving in Polynesia. The whole time he just kept getting richer and the feats and stunts and adventures went cold for him, bit by bit, each mountain conquered. Eventually he pulled in his horns and became alarmingly sedentary and complacent. In a manner of speaking, he became fat and content. Oh, the handsome, charismatic man of action was there, the high-stakes gambler, the financial lion, the exotic lover—they were simply buried under forty extra pounds of suet following a decade of rich food and boredom. It was that professional ennui which provoked a midlife crisis and

led him into the reckless pursuits of avocations best reserved for youngsters. Surfing and sweat lodges. Avant-garde poetry and experimental art. Psychedelic drugs, and plenty of them. He went so far as to have his dick pierced while under the influence. Most reckless of all, love. Specifically love for a college girl with world-beater ambitions. A college girl who could have been a daughter in another life.

Wallace returned Helen's smile in an act of will. "Why not? But I'm not doing anything kinky, no matter how much you pay me."

"Shucks," Helen said, and bounced. Dressed in faded blue overalls she resembled a slightly oversized Christmas elf.

Wallace grunted and followed. Hot as a kiln; humidity slapped him across florid jowls, doubled his vision momentarily. He absently unglued his tropical shirt from his paunch and took a survey. On the passenger side, below the gravel slope and rail, spread the field: A dead farm overrun with brittle grass and mustard-yellow clusters of dandelions on tall stalks. Centered in the morass, a solitary barn, reduced to postcard dimensions, half-collapsed. Farther on, more forest and hills.

He had lived around these parts, just west of Olympia, for ages. The field and its decaying barn were foreign. This was a spur, a scenic detour through a valley of failed farmland. He did not come this way often, had not ever really looked. It had been Helen's idea. She was eager to travel every back road, see what was over every new hill. They were not in a hurry—cocktails with the Langans at The Mud Shack were not for another hour and it was nothing formal. No business; Helen forbade it on this, their pseudo-honeymoon. The real deal would come in August, hopefully. Wallace's wrangling with certain offshore accounts and recalcitrant foreign officials had delayed the works long enough, which was why he did not argue, did not press his luck. They could do a loop on the Alcan if it made her happy.

Caw-ca-caw! A crow drifted toward the pucker brush. Wallace tracked it with his index finger and cocked thumb.

"You think somebody owns that?" Helen swept the field with a gesture. She uncapped the camera. Beneath denim straps her muscular shoulders shone slick as walnut.

“Yeah.” Wallace was pretty sure what was coming. He glanced at his Gucci loafers with a trace of sadness. He called to Delaney. “What d’ya got, Dee?” Stalling.

Delaney muttered something about crabs. Then, “It ain’t a vapor lock. Grab my tools. They’re by the spare.”

Wallace sprang the trunk, found the oily rag with the wrenches. He went around front, where a scowling Delaney sucked on another cigarette. The short, dusky man accepted the tools without comment. Greasy fingerprints marred his trousers. His lucky disco pants, tragically.

“Want me to call a wrecker?” Wallace tapped the cell phone at his hip. He made a note to send Delaney’s pants to Mr. Woo, owner of the best dry cleaners this side of Tacoma. Mr. Woo was a magician with solvents.

Delaney considered, dismissed the idea with a shrug. “Screw it. I’ve got some electric tape, I’ll fix it. If not, we’ll get Triple-A out here in a bit.”

“What can I do?”

“Stand there looking sexy, Boss. Or corral your woman before she wanders off into the woods.”

Wallace noticed that his darling wife waded waist-deep in the grass, halfway across the clearing, her braids flopping merrily. He sighed, rolled his shoulders and started trudging. Yelling at this distance was undignified. Lord, keeping track of her was worse than raising a puppy.

The crumbling grade almost tripped him. At the bottom, remnants of a fence—rotted posts, snares of wire. Barbs dug a red zigzag in his calf. He cursed, lumbered into the grass. It rose, coarse and brown, slapped his legs and buttocks. A dry breeze awoke and the yellow dandelion blooms swayed toward him.

Wallace’s breath came too hard too quickly. Every step crackled. Bad place to drop a match. He remembered staring, mesmerized, at a California brushfire in the news. No way on God’s green earth—or in His dead grass sea—a walrus in loafers would outrace such a blaze. “Helen!” The shout emerged as a wheeze.

The barn loomed, blanked a span of the sky. Gray planks, roof gone to seed wherever it hadn’t crumpled. Jagged windows. In its long shadow lay the

tottered frame of a truck, mostly disintegrated and entangled in brambles. Wallace shaded his eyes, looking for the ruins of the house that must be nearby, spotted a foundation several yards away where the weeds thinned. Nothing left but shattered concrete and charred bits of timber.

No sign of Helen.

Wallace wiped his face, hoped she had not fallen into a hole. He opened his mouth to call again and stopped. Something gleamed near his feet, small and white. Squirrel bones caught in a bush. A mild surprise that the skeleton was intact. From his hunting experience, scavengers reliably scattered such remains.

Wallace stood still then. Became aware of the silence, the pulse in his temple. Thirst gnawed him. He suddenly, completely, craved a drink. Whiskey.

And now it struck him, the absence of insects. He strained to detect the hum of bees among the flowers, the drone of flies among the droppings. Zero. The old world had receded, deposited him into a sterile microcosm of itself, a Chinese puzzle box. Over Wallace's shoulder Delaney and the car glinted, miniature images on a miniature screen. A few dusty clouds dragged shadows across the field. The field flickered, flickered.

"Hey, Old Man River, you having a heart attack, or what?" Helen materialized in the vicinity of the defunct truck. The silver camera was welded to her right eye. *Click, click.*

"Don't make me sorry I bought that little toy of yours." Wallace shielded his eyes to catch her expression. "Unless maybe you're planning to ditch poetry and shoot a spread for *National Geographic*."

Helen snapped another picture. "Why, yes. I'm photographing the albino boor in its native habitat." She smiled coyly.

"Yah, okay. We came, we saw, we got rubbed by poison sumac. Time to move along before we bake our brains."

"I didn't see any sumac."

"Like you'd recognize it if it bit you on the ass, lady."

"Oh, I would, I would. I wanna take some pictures of that." Helen thrust the camera at the barn. Here was her indefatigable fascination—the girl

collected relics and fragments, then let the images of sinister Americana stew in her brain until inspiration gave birth to something essay-worthy. The formula worked, without question. She was on her way to the top, according to the buzz. *Harper's*; *Poetry*; *The New Yorker* and *Granta*—she was a force to be reckoned with and it was early in the game.

"There it is, fire when ready."

"I want to go inside, for a quick peek."

"Ah, shit on that." Wallace's nose itched. The folds of his neck hung loose and raw. A migraine laid bricks in the base of his skull. "It isn't safe. I bet there's some big honking spiders, too. Black widows." He hissed feebly and made pinching motions.

"Well, yeah. That's why I want you to come with me, sweetness. Protect me from the giant, honking spiders."

"What's in it for me?"

She batted her lashes.

"A quick peek, you say."

"Two shakes of a lamb's tail," she said.

"Oh, in that case." Wallace approached the barn. "Interesting."

"What." Helen sounded preoccupied. She fiddled with the camera, frowning. "This thing is going hinky on me—I hope my batteries aren't dying."

"Huh. There's the driveway, and it's been used recently." The track was overgrown. It curved across the field like a hidden scar and joined the main road yonder. Boot prints sank into softer ground near the barn, tire treads and faint marks, as if something flat had swept the area incompletely. The boot prints were impressive—Wallace wore a 13-Wide and his shoe resembled a child's alongside one.

"Kids. Bet this is a groovy spot to party," Helen said. "My senior year in high school, we used to cruise out to the gravel pits after dark and have bonfire parties. Mmm-mm, Black Label and Coors Light. I can still taste the vomit!"

Wallace did not see any cans, or bottles, or cigarette butts. “Yeah, guess so,” he said. “Saw a squirrel skeleton. Damned thing was in one piece, too.”

“Really. There’re bird bones all over the place, just hanging in the bushes.”

“Whole birds?”

“Yup. I shot pictures of a couple. Kinda weird, huh?”

Wallace hesitated at the entrance of the barn, peering through a wedge between the slat doors. The wood smelled of ancient tar, its warps steeped in decades of smoke and brutal sunlight, marinated in manure and urine. Another odor lurked beneath this—ripe and sharp. The interior was a blue-black aquarium. Dust revolved in sluggish shafts.

Helen nudged him and they crossed over.

The structure was immense. Beams ribbed the roof like a cathedral. Squared posts provided additional support. The dirt floor was packed tight as asphalt and littered with withered straw and boards. Obscured by gloom, a partition divided the vault; beyond that the murky impression of a hayloft.

“My god, this is amazing.” Helen turned a circle, drinking in the ambience, her face butter-soft.

Along the near wall were ranks of shelves and cabinets. Fouled implements cluttered the pegboard and hooks—pitchforks, shovels, double-headed axes, mattocks, a scythe; all manner of equipment, much of it caked in the gray sediment of antiquity and unrecognizable. Wallace studied what he took to be a curiously shaped bear trap, knew its serrated teeth could pulp a man’s thighbone. Rust welded its mouth shut. He had seen traps like it in Argentina and Bengal. A diesel generator squatted in a notch between shelves, bolted to a concrete foot. Fresh grease welled in the battered case.

Was it cooler in here? Sweat dried on Wallace’s face, his nipples stiffened magically. He shivered. His eyes traveled up and fixed upon letters chalked above the main doors. Thin and spiky and black, they spelled:

THEY WHO DWELL IN THE CRACKS

“Whoa,” Wallace said. There was more, the writing was everywhere. Some blurred by grease and grit, some clear as:

FOOL

Or:

LUCTOR ET EMERGO

And corroded gibberish:

GODOFBLOATCHEMOSHBAALPEEORBELPHEGOR

“Honey? Yoo-hoo?” Wallace backed away from the yokel graffiti. He was sweating again. It oozed, stung his lips. His guts sloshed and prickles chased across his body. Kids partying? He thought not. Not kids.

“Wallace, come here!” Helen called from the opposite side of the partition. “You gotta check this out!”

He went, forcing his gaze from the profane and disturbing phrases. Had to watch for boards, some were studded with nails and wouldn’t that take the cake, to get tetanus from this madcap adventure. “Helen, it’s time to go.”

“Okay, but look. I mean, Jesus.” Her tone was flat.

He passed through a pool of light thrown down from a gap in the roof. Blue sky filled the hole. A sucker hole, that’s what pilots called them. Sucker holes.

The stench thickened.

Three low stone pylons were erected as a triangle that marked the perimeter of a shallow depression. The pylons were rude phalluses carved with lunatic symbols. Within the hollow, a dead horse lay on its side, mired in filthy, stagnant water. The reek of feces was magnificently awful.

Helen touched his shoulder and pointed. Up.

The progenitor of all wasp nests sprawled across the ceiling like a fantastic alien city. An inverse complex of domes and humps and dangling paper streamers. Wallace estimated the hive to be fully twelve feet in diameter. A prodigy of nature, a primordial specimen miraculously preserved in the depths of the barn. The depending strands jiggled from a swirl of air through a broken window. Some were pink as flesh; others a rich scarlet or lusterless purple-black like the bed of a crushed thumbnail.

Oddly, no wasps darted among the convolutions of the nest, nor did flies or beetles make merry among the feculent quagmire or upon the carcass of the horse. Silence ruled this roost surely as it did the field.

Wallace wished for a flashlight, because the longer he squinted the more he became convinced he was not looking at a wasp nest. This was a polyp, as if the very fabric of the wooden ceiling had nurtured a cancer, a tumor swollen on the bloody juices of unspeakable feasts. The texture was translucent in portions, and its membranous girth enfolded a mass of indistinct shapes. Knotty loops of rope, gourds, hanks of kelp.

Click, click.

Helen knelt on the rim of the hollow, aiming her camera at the horse. Her mouth was a slit in a pallid mask. Her exposed eye rolled.

Wallace pivoted slowly, too slowly, as though slogging through wet concrete. *She shouldn't be doing that. We really should be going.*

Click, click.

The horse trembled. Wallace groaned a warning. The horse kicked Helen in the face. She sat down hard, legs splayed, forehead a dented eggshell. And the horse was thrashing now, heeling over, breaching in its shallow cistern, a blackened whale, legs churning, hooves whipping. It shrieked from a dripping muzzle bound in razor wire. Wallace made an ungainly leap for his wife as she toppled sideways into the threshing chaos. A sledgehammer caught him in the hip and the barn began turning, its many gaps of light spinning like a carousel. He flung a hand out.

Blood and shit and mud, flowing. The sucker holes closed, one by one.

2

"You're a violent man," Helen said without emphasis. Her eyes were large and cool. "Ever hurt anyone?"

Wallace had barely recovered his wits from sex. Their first time, and in a hot tub no less. He was certainly a little drunk, more than a little adrenalized, flushed and heaving. They had eventually clambered onto the deck and lay as the stars whirled.

Helen pinched him, hard. "Don't you even think about lying to me," she hissed. "Who was it?"

"It's going to be you if you do that again," he growled.

She pinched him again, left a purple thumbprint on his bicep.

Wallace yelled, put her in a mock headlock, kissed her.

Helen said, “I’m serious. Who was it?”

“It’s not important.”

Helen sat up, wrapped herself in a towel. “I’m going inside.”

“What?”

“I’m going inside.”

“Harold Carter. We were dorm mates,” Wallace said, finally. He was sinking into himself, then, seeing it again with the clarity of fire. “Friend of ours hosted an off-campus poker club. Harold took me once. I wasn’t a gambler and it was a rough crowd aiming to trim the fat off rich college kids like ourselves. I wouldn’t go back, but Harold did. He went two, three nights a week, sometimes spent the entire weekend. Lost his shirt. Deeper he got, the harder he clawed. Addiction, right? After a while, his dad’s checks weren’t enough. He borrowed money—from me, from his other buddies, his sister. Still not enough. One day, when he was very desperate, he stole my wallet. It was the week after Christmas vacation and I had three hundred bucks. He blew it at a strip club. Didn’t even pay off his gambling marker. I remember waiting up for him when he straggled in at dawn, looking pale and beat. He had glitter on his cheeks from the dancers, for God’s sake. He smiled at me with the game face, said hi, and I busted him in the mouth. He lost his uppers, needed stitches. I drove him to the hospital. Only time I ever punched anyone.” Which skirted being a lie only by definition. He had flattened a porter in Kenya with the butt of a rifle and smashed a big, dumb Briton in the face with a bottle of Jameson during a pub brawl in Dublin. They had it coming. The porter tried to abscond with some money and an antique Bowie knife. The Brit was just plain crazy-mean and drunk as a bull in rut. Wallace was not going to talk about that, though.

They lay, watching constellations burn. Helen said, “I’ll go to Washington, if I’m still invited.”

“Yes! What changed your mind?”

She didn’t say anything for a while. When she spoke, her tone was troubled. “You’re a magnet. Arizona sucks. It just feels right.”

“Don’t sound so happy about it.”

“It’s not that. My parents hate you. Mother ordered me to dump your ass, find somebody not waiting in line for a heart bypass. Not in those words, but there it was.” Helen laughed. “So let’s get the hell out of here tomorrow—don’t tell anybody. I’ll call my folks after we settle in.”

Wallace’s chest ballooned with such joy he was afraid his eyes were going to spring leaks. “Sounds good,” he said gruffly. “Sounds good.”

Wallace stood in the gaping cargo door of a Huey. The helicopter cruised above a sandy coast, perhaps the thin edge of a desert. The sea was rigid blue like a watercolor. A white car rolled on the winding road and the rotor shadow chopped it in half. He recognized the car as his own from college—he had sold it to an Iranian immigrant for seventy-five dollars, had forgotten to retrieve a bag of grass from the trunk and spent a few sweaty months praying the Iranian would not know what it was if he ever found it. Was Delaney driving? Wallace wondered why a Huey—he had never served in the military, not even the reserves or the Coast Guard. Too young by a couple of years for Viet Nam, and too old for anything that came about during the bitter end of the Cold War. Then he remembered—after the horse broke his leg, he had been airlifted to Harbor View in Seattle.

Soundless, except for Mr. Woo’s voice, coming from everywhere and nowhere. God had acquired a Cantonese accent, apparently.

“Mr. Wallace, you are very unlucky in love, I think,” Mr. Woo said from the shining air. He was not unkind.

“Three strikes,” Wallace said with a smile. He smiled constantly. No one mentioned it, but he was aware. His face ached and he could not stop. “Gracie divorced me. Right out of college, so it doesn’t count. A practice run. Beth was hell on wheels. She skinned me alive for what—ten years? If I’d known what kind of chicks glom onto real estate tycoons, I would’ve jumped a freight train and lived the hobo life. You have no idea, my friend. I didn’t really divorce her, I escaped. After Beth, I made a solemn vow to never marry again. Every few years I’d just find some mean, ugly woman and buy her a house. Helen’s different. The real deal.”

“Oh, Mr. Wallace? I thought you live in big house in Olympia.”

“I owned several, in the old days. She took the villa in Cancun. Too warm for me anyway.”

“But this one, this young girl. You killed her.”

“She’s not dead. The doctors say she might come ’round any day. Besides, she’s faster than I am. I can’t keep up.”

“A young girl needs discipline, Mr. Wallace. You must watch over her like a child. She should not be permitted to wander. You are very unlucky.”

The chopper melted. Mr. Woo’s wrinkled hands appeared first, then a plastic bag with Wallace’s suit on a hanger. A wobbly fan rattled above the counter. “Here is your ticket, Mr. Wallace. Here is some Reishi mushroom for Mrs. Wallace. Take it, please.”

“Thanks, Woo.” Wallace carefully accepted his clothes, carried them from the dingy, chemical-rich shop with the ginger gait of a man bearing holy artifacts. It was a ritual he clung to as the universe quaked around him. With so much shaking and quaking he wondered how the birds balanced on the wire, how leaves stayed green upon their branches.

Delaney met him at the car, took the clothes and held the door. He handed Wallace his walking stick, waited for him to settle in the passenger seat. Delaney had bought Wallace an Irish blackthorn as a welcome home present. An elegant cane, it made Wallace appear more distinguished than he deserved, Delaney said. Wallace had to agree—his flesh sagged like a cheap gorilla suit, minus the hair, and his bones were too prominent. His eyes were the color of bad liver, and his broad face was a garden of broken veins.

There were reasons. Two hip operations, a brutal physical therapy regimen. Pain was a faithful companion. Except, what was with the angry weals on his neck and shoulders? Keloid stripes, reminiscent of burns or lashes. Helen was similarly afflicted; one had festered on her scalp and taken a swath of hair. Their origin was on the tip of Wallace’s tongue, but his mind was in neutral, gears stripped, belts whirring, and nothing stuck. He knocked back a quart of vodka a day, no problem, and had started smoking again. A pack here or there—who was counting? He only ate when Delaney

forced the issue. Hells-bells, if he drank enough martinis he could live on the olives.

Delaney drove him home. They did not talk. Their relationship had evolved far beyond the necessity of conversation. Wallace stared at the trees, the buildings. These familiar things seemed brand new each time he revisited them. The details were exquisitely rendered, but did not con him into accepting the fishbowl. Artificial: the trees, the houses, the windup people on the shaded streets. Wallace examined his hands; artificial too. The sinews, the soft tissues and skeletal framework were right there in the X-ray sunlight. He was Death waiting to dance as the guest of honor at *Día de los Muertos*.

Wallace was no longer in the car. The car melted. It did not perturb him. He was accustomed to jump-cuts, seamless transitions, waking dreams. Doctor Green said he required more sleep or the hallucinatory episodes would intensify, destroy his ability to function. Wallace wondered if he ever slept at all. There was no way to be certain. The gaps in his short-term memory were chasms.

He was at home in the big house his fortune built, seated stiffly on the sofa Beth, ex-wife number two, procured from Malaysia along with numerous throw rugs, vases and some disturbing artwork depicting fertility goddesses and hapless mortals. He did not like the décor, had never gotten around to selling it at auction. Funny that Beth took half of everything and abandoned these items so punctiliously selected and obtained at prohibitive expense. Wallace's closest friend, Skip Arden, suggested that Beth always hoped things would change for the better, that she might regain favor. Skip offered to burn the collection for him.

Wallace's house was a distorted reflection of the home he had grown up in, a kind of anti-mirror. This modern house was designed by a famous German architect that Beth read of in a foreign art directory. Multi-tiered in the fashion of an antique citadel, and as a proper citadel, it occupied a hill. There was an ivy-covered wall, a garden and maple trees. Mt. Rainier fumed patiently in its quarter of the horizon. At night, lights twinkled in the town and inched along the highway. Wallace's personal possessions countered the overwhelming Baroque overtones—his hunting trophies, which included a den crammed with the mounted heads of wild boars,

jaguars and gazelles; and his gun collection, a formidable floor-to-ceiling chestnut-paneled cabinet that contained a brace of armament ranging from an assortment of knives and daggers native to three dozen nationalities, to an even greater array of guns—from WWII American issue Browning .45 automatics up to show-stopping big-game rifles, the Model 76 African .416 and his pride and joy, a Holland & Holland .500, which had come to him from the private collection of a certain Indian prince, and was capable of sitting a bull elephant on its ass. Littered throughout the rambling mansion was the photographic evidence of his rough and wild youth; mostly black and white and shot by compatriots long dead or succumbed to stultified existences similar to his own. The weapons and the photographs grounded his little hot air balloon of sanity, but they also led to *thinking* and he had never been one to dwell on the past, to suffer introspection. They were damning, these fly-buzz whispers that built and built with each stroke of the minute hand, each wallowing undulation of the ice in his drink. *You always wanted to be Hemingway. Run with the bulls; fire big guns and drink the cantinas dry. Maybe you'll end up like the old man, after all. Let's look at those pistols again, hmm?* And when such thoughts grew too noisy, he took another snort of bourbon and quieted the crowd in his skull.

Outside his skull, all was peaceful. Just Wallace, Helen, Helen's aides, Cecil and Kate, Delaney, and Bruno and Thor, a pair of mastiffs that had been trained by Earl Hutchison out in Yelm. The dogs were quietly ubiquitous as they patrolled the house and the grounds. The gardener called on Friday; the housecleaner and her team every other weekend. They had keys; no one else bothered Wallace except Wallace's friends.

These friends came and went unexpectedly. Ghosts flapping in skins. Who? Skip and Randy Freeman made frequent guest appearances. Barret and Macy Langan; Manfred and Elizabeth Steiner. Wallace thought he had seen his own father, though that was unlikely. Dad divided his time between the VFW, the Masonic Temple and the Elks Lodge, and according to reports, his participation at social gatherings was relegated to playing canasta, drinking gin and rambling about "The Big One" as if he had jubilantly kissed a nurse in Time Square to celebrate V-J Day only last week.

"She's getting worse," Skip said as he helped himself to Wallace's liquor. "You should ship her to Saint Pete's and be done with it. Or send her home

to ma and pa. Whatever you've got to do to get out from under this mess." He was talking about Helen, although he could have been discussing a prize Hereford, or an expensive piece of furniture. His own wife hated him and refused to live under his roof, it was said. Skip, a reformed attorney-at-law, was older and fatter than Wallace. Skip drank more too, but somehow appeared to be in much better shape. His craggy features were ruddy as Satan under thick, white hair. Egregiously blunt, he got away with tons of indiscretions because he was a basso profundo who made Perry Mason sound like a Vienna choirboy. Jaws slackened when he started rumbling.

"Is she?" Wallace nodded abstractedly. "I hadn't noticed."

"Yes she is, and yes you have," said Randy Freeman, the radical biologist. Radical was accurate—he had bought *The Anarchist Cookbook* and conducted some experiments in a gravel pit up past the Mima Mounds. Which was how he had blown off his right hand. His flesh-tone prosthesis was nice, but it was not fooling anybody. He had recently completed a study of the behavior of crows in urban environments and planned to write a book. Randy was a proponent of human cloning for spare parts.

Skip said, "Nine months. Enough is enough, for the love of Pete, you could've given birth. Pull yourself together, get back on the horse. Uh, so to speak. You should work." He gestured broadly. "Do *something* besides grow roots on your couch and gawk."

"Yeah," said Randy.

"I do things, Skip. Look, I got my dry cleaning. Here it is. I pick it up every Thursday." Wallace patted the crinkly plastic, rubbed it between his fingers.

"You're taking those pills Green prescribed."

"Sure, sure," Wallace said. Delaney sorted the pills and brought them with a glass of water at the right hour. Good thing, too. There were so many, Wallace would have been confused as to which, where and when.

"Well, stop taking them. Now."

"Okay." It was all the same to Wallace.

"He can't stop taking them—not all at once," Randy said. "Wallace, what you gotta do is cut back. I'll talk to Delaney."

“We’ll talk to Delaney about this, all right. That crap is eating your brain,” Skip said. “I’ll give you some more free advice. You sue those sonsofbitches that own that Black Hills property. Jerry Premus is champing at the bit to file a claim.”

“Yeah… he keeps calling me,” Wallace said. “I’m not suing anybody. We shouldn’t have been there.”

“Go on thinking that, Sparky. Premus will keep the papers warm in case your goddamned senses return,” Skip said.

Wallace said, “She *is* getting worse. I hear strange noises at night, too.” It was more than strange noises, wasn’t it? What about the figure he glimpsed in the garden after dusk? A hulking shadow in a robe and a tall, conical hat. The getup was similar to, but infinitely worse, than the ceremonial garb a Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan might wear. The costumed figure blurred in his mind and he was not certain if it existed as anything other than a hallucination, an amalgam of childhood demons, trauma and drugs.

He looked from his reflection in the dark window and his friends were already gone, slipped away while he was gathering wool. Ice cubes collapsed in his glass. The glass tilted slackly in his hand. “Nine months. Maybe Skipperoo’s got a point. Maybe I need to wheel and deal, get into the old groove. What do you think, Mr. Smith?” Wallace spoke to his glum reflection and his reflection was stonily silent.

“Mr. Smith?” Cecil’s voice crackled over the intercom, eerily distorted. They had installed the system long ago, but never used it much until after the accident. It was handy, despite the fact it almost gave Wallace a coronary whenever it started unexpectedly broadcasting. “Do you want to see Helen?”

Wallace said, “Yes; be right up,” although he was sickened by the prospect. Helen’s face was a mess, a terrible, terrible mess, and it was not the only thing. Whenever Wallace looked at her, if he really looked at her a bit more closely after the initial knee-jerk revulsion, the clouds in his memory began to dissolve. Wallace did not like that, did not like the funhouse parade of disjointed imagery, the shocking volume of the animal’s screams, the phantom reek of putrescence. The triple pop of Delaney’s nickel-plated

automatic as he fired into the horse's head. Wallace preferred his thick comforter of pill- and alcohol-fueled numbness.

Dalton had asked him, *You really love this girl? She isn't like one of your chippies you can bang for a few years and buy off with a divorce settlement. This is serious, sonny boy.*

Yeah, Dad. Course, I do.

She a trophy? Better goddamn well not be. Don't shit where you eat.

Dad, I love her.

Good God. You must have it bad. Never heard a Smith say that before…

Wallace pressed the button again. "Is she awake?"

"Uh, yes. I just finished feeding her."

"Oh, good." Wallace walked slowly, not acknowledging Delaney's sudden presence at his elbow. Delaney was afraid he would fall, shatter his fragile hip.

One of Wallace's private contractors had converted a guestroom into Helen's quarters. A rectangular suite with a long terrace over the garden. Hardwood floors and vaulted ceilings. They needed ample space to house her therapy equipment—the hydraulic lift and cargo net to transport her into the changing room, the prototype stander which was a device designed to prevent muscle atrophy by elevating her to a vertical plane on a rectangular board. She screamed torture when they did this every other afternoon and wouldn't quit until Cecil stuck headphones over her ears and piped in Disney music.

Helen lay in bed, propped by a rubber wedge and pillows. During the accident, her brain was deprived of sufficient oxygen for several minutes. Coupled with the initial blunt trauma, skull fractures and bacterial contamination, the effects were devastating. Essentially, the accident had rendered Helen an adult fetus. Her right hand, curled tight as a hardwood knot, was callused from habitual gnawing. She possessed minimal control of her left hand, could gesture randomly and convulsively grasp objects. Cecil splinted it a few hours a day, as he did her twisted feet, to prevent her tendons from shortening. Her lack of a swallow reflex made tube-feeding a necessity. She choked on drool. It was often impossible to tell if she could

distinguish one visitor from another, or if she could see anything at all. Cortical blindness, the doctors said. The worst part was the staph infection she contracted from her open head wound. The dent in her skull would not heal. It refused to scab and was constantly inflamed. The doctors kept changing her medication and predicting a breakthrough, but Wallace could tell they were worried. She had caught a strain resistant to antibiotics and was essentially screwed.

"Hi, Mr. Smith." Cecil carefully placed the feeding apparatus into a dish tub. He was a rugged fellow, close to Helen's age. Built like a linebacker, he was surprisingly gentle and unobtrusive. He faithfully performed his myriad duties and retreated into the adjoining chamber. It was always him or his counterpart, the RN Kate, a burly woman who said even less than Cecil. She dressed in an official starched white pinafore over her conservative dresses and a white hat. Wallace always knew when she was around because she favored quaint, polished wooden shoes that click-clocked on the bare floors. Ginger Rogers, he privately called her. Ginger Rogers tapping through the halls.

Helen flinched and moaned when Wallace took her hand. Startle reflex, was the medical term. She smiled flaccidly, eyes vacant as buttons. She smelled of baby powder and antiseptic.

Wallace heard himself say, "Hey, darling, how was dinner?" Meanwhile, it was the raw wound in her forehead that commanded his attention, drew him with grim certainty, compounded his sense of futility and doom.

Abruptly exhausted, he whispered farewell to Helen and shuffled upstairs and crawled into bed.

3

After the world waned fuzzy and velvet-dim, he was roused by the noises he had mentioned to Skip and Randy. The night noises.

He pretended it was a dream—the blankets were heavy, his flesh was heavy, he was paralyzed but for the darting of his eyes, the staccato drum roll in his chest. The noises came through the walls and surrounded his bed. Faint sounds, muffled sounds. Scratching and scrabbling, hiccupping and slithering. Soft, hoarse laughter floated up to his window from the garden.

Wallace stashed a .357 magnum in the dresser an arm length from his bed. He could grab that pistol and unload it at the awful giant he imagined was prowling among the rosebushes and forsythia and snowball trees. He closed his eyes and made fists. Could not raise them to his ears. The room became black as pitch and settled over him and pressed down upon him like a leaden shroud. Grains of plaster dusted the coverlet. *Pitter-pat, pitter-pat.*

4

Detective Adams caught Wallace on a good morning. It was Wallace's fifty-first birthday and unseasonably cold, with a threat of rain. Wallace was killing a bottle of Hennessy Private Reserve he'd received from Skip as an early present and shaking from a chill that had no name. However, Wallace was coherent for the first time in months. Delaney had reduced the pills per Skip's orders and it was working. He was death-warmed-over, but his faculties were tripping along the tracks right on schedule. He toyed with the idea of strangling Delaney, of hanging him by the heels. His mood was mitigated solely by the fact he was not scheduled for therapy until Thursday. Possibly he hated therapy more than poor shrieking Helen did.

Detective Adams arrived unannounced and joined Wallace on the garden patio at the glass table with the forlorn umbrella. Adams actually resembled a cop to Wallace, which meant he dressed like the homicide cops on the television dramas. He wore a gray wool coat that matched the streaks in his hair. A square guy, sturdy and genial, though it was plain this latter was an affectation, an icebreaker. His stony eyes were too frank for any implication of friendliness to survive long. He flicked a glance at the mostly empty bottle by Wallace's wrist. "Hey there, Mr. Smith, you're looking better every time I swing by. Seriously though, it's cold. Sure you should be hanging around like this? You might get pneumonia or something. My aunt lives over in Jersey. She almost croaked a couple years ago."

"Pneumonia?"

"Nah, breast cancer. Her cousin died of pneumonia. Longshoreman."

Wallace was smoking unfiltered Cheyenne cigarettes in his plushest tiger-striped bathrobe. His feet were tinged blue as day-old fish. His teeth

chattered. “Just when you think spring is here, winter comes back to whack us in the balls. One for the road, eh?”

Detective Adams smiled. “How’s everything? Your hip…?”

“Mostly better. Bones are healed, so they say. Hurts like hell.”

“How’s your wife?”

“Helen’s parents are angry. They want me to send her to Arizona, pay for a home. They’re… yeah, it’s screwed up.”

“Ah. Are you planning to do that?”

“Do what?”

“Send her home.”

“She’s got a lot of family in the southwest… Lot of family.” Wallace lighted another cigarette after a few false starts.

“Maybe sending your wife to Arizona is a good idea, Mr. Smith. Heck, a familiar setting with familiar faces, she might snap out of this. Never know.”

Wallace smoked. “Fuck ’em. What’s new with you, Detective?”

“Not a darned thing, which is pretty normal in my field. I just thought I’d touch base, see if any more details had occurred to you since our last palaver.”

“When was that?”

“Huh? Oh, let me check.” Adams flipped open a notebook. “About three weeks. You don’t remember.”

“I do now,” Wallace said. “I’m still a little mixed up, you see. My brain is kind of woozy.”

“Yeah,” Adams turned up the wattage of his smile. “I boxed some. Know what you mean.”

“You talk to Delaney? Delaney saw the whole thing.”

“I’ve spoken to everyone. But, to be perfectly clear, Delaney didn’t actually see *everything*. Did he?”

“Delaney shot the horse.”

“Yes, I saw the casings. A fine job under pressure.”

This had also been present in each interview; an undercurrent of suspicion. Wallace said, “So, Detective, I wonder. You think I smashed her head in with a mallet, or what?”

“Then broke your own hip and somehow disposed of the weapon before Mr. Delaney made the scene? Oh, I don’t suppose I think anything along those lines. The case bothers me, is all. It’s a burr under my saddle blanket, heh. We examined the scene thoroughly. And… without a horse carcass, we’re kinda stuck.”

“You think Delaney did it.” Wallace nodded and took a drag. “You think me and Delaney are in it together. Hey, maybe we’re lovers and Helen was cramping our style. Or maybe I wanted Helen’s money. Oops, I have plenty of my own. Let me ponder this, I’ll come up with a motive.” He chuckled and lighted another cigarette from the dwindling stub of his current smoke.

Wallace’s humor must have been contagious. Detective Adams laughed wryly. He raised his blocky cop hands. “Peace, Mr. Smith. Nothing like that. The evidence was crystal—that horse, wherever it went, just about did for the two of you. Lucky things turned out as well as they did.”

“I don’t feel so lucky, Detective.”

“I guess not. My problem is, well, heck, it’s not actually a problem. There’s something odd about what happened to you, Mr. Smith. Something weird about that property. It’s pretty easy to forget how it was, standing in there, in the barn, screening the area for evidence. Too easy. Those pylons were a trip. Boy howdy!”

“Don’t,” Wallace said. He did not want to consider the pylons, the traps or the graffiti. The imagery played havoc with his guts.

“Lately, I get the feeling someone is messing with my investigation.”

“Please don’t,” Wallace said, louder.

“My report was altered, Mr. Smith. Know what that means? Somebody went into the files and rewrote portions of the paperwork. That doesn’t happen at the department. Ever.”

“Goddamn it!” Wallace slammed his fist on the table, sent the bottle clattering. His mind went crashing back to the barn where he had regained consciousness for several seconds—Helen beside him in the muck, dark

blood pulsing over her exposed brain, surging with her heartbeat. He covered his eyes. “Sorry. But I can’t handle talking about this. I don’t like to think about what happened. I do whatever I can to not think about it.”

“Don’t be offended—I need to ask this.” Adams was implacable as an android, or a good telemarketer. “You aren’t into any sort of cult activity, are you? Rich folks get bored, sometimes they get mixed up with stuff they shouldn’t. I’ve seen it before. There’s a history in these parts.”

“There’s history wherever you go, Detective. You ought to ask the people who own that property—”

“The Choates. Morgan Choate.”

“They’re the ones with all the freaky cult bullshit going on.”

“Believe me, I’d love to find Anton LaVey’s nephew was shacking there, something like that. Solve all my headaches. The Choate place was foreclosed on three years ago. Developer from Snoqualmie holds the deed. This guy doesn’t know squat—he bought the land at auction, never set foot on it in his life. Anybody could be messing around out there.”

Wallace did not give a tinker’s damn about who or what might be going on, he was simply grateful they would be grinding that barn into dust and fairly soon.

Detective Adams waited a moment. Then, softly as a conspirator, “Strange business is going on, Mr. Smith. Like I said—we checked your story very carefully. The Smith name carries weight in this neck of the woods, I assure you. My boss would have my balls if I hassled you.”

“Come on, my pappy isn’t a senator anymore. I’m not exactly his favorite, anyway.”

“Just doing my job, and all that.”

“I understand, Detective. Hell, bad apples even fell off the Kennedy tree. Right?”

“I’m sure you’re not a bad apple. You seem to be a solid citizen. You pay your taxes, you hire locally and you give to charity.”

“Don’t forget, I donated to the Policeman’s Ball five years running.”

“That’s a write-off, sure, but it’s worth what you paid. Ask me, your involvement is purely happenstance. You’re a victim. I don’t understand the whole picture, yet. If there’s anything you haven’t told me, if you saw something… Well, I’d appreciate any help you might give me.”

Wallace lifted his head, studied Adams closely. The cop was frayed—bulging eyes latticed with red veins, a twitch, cheeks rough as Brillo. Adams’ cologne masked the sour musk of hard liquor. His clothes were wrinkled as if he’d slept in them. Wallace said, “As far as I’m concerned, it’s over. I want to move on.”

“Understandable, Mr. Smith. You’ve got my number. You know the drill.” The detective stood, peered across the landscaped grounds to the forest. A peacock strutted back and forth. A neighbor raised them in the distant past; the man lost his farm and the peacocks escaped into the wild. The remaining few haunted the woods. The bird’s movements were mechanical. Back and forth. “Do me a favor. Be careful, Mr. Smith. It’s a mean world.”

Wallace watched Adams climb into a brown sedan, drive off with the caution of an elderly woman. The brake lights flashed, and Adams leaned from the window and appeared to vomit.

Daylight drained fast after that.

5

Wallace pulled on the loosest fitting suit in his wardrobe, which was not difficult considering how the pounds had melted from him during his long recovery. He knotted a tie and splashed his face with cologne and crippled his way downstairs to the liquor cabinet and fixed himself a double scotch on the rocks. He downed that and decided on another for the road. Sweat dripped from him and his shirt stuck to the small of his back and hips. He sweated nonstop, it seemed, as if the house were a giant sauna and yet he routinely dialed the thermostat down to the point where he could see his own breath.

Pain nibbled at him, worried at his will. He resisted the urge to swallow some of the heavy-duty pills in his coat pocket—promises to keep. Then he went somewhat unsteadily to the foyer with its granite tiles and a marble statue of some nameless Greek wrestler and the chandelier on its black

chain, a mass of tiered crystal as unwieldy as any that ever graced the ballroom of a Transylvanian castle or a doomed luxury liner, and reported to Delaney. Delaney eyed him critically, dusted lint from his shoulder and straightened his tie while Wallace dabbed his face with a silk, monogrammed handkerchief, one of a trove received on birthdays and Christmases past, and still the sweat rilled from his brow and his neck and he wilted in his handsome suit. Delaney finally opened the front door and escorted him to the car. The air was cold and tasted of smog from the distant highway. Delaney started the engine and drove via the darkened back roads into Olympia. They crossed the new Fourth Avenue Bridge with its extra-wide sidewalks and faux Gaslight Era lampposts that conveyed a gauzy and oh-so-cozy glow and continued downtown past unlit shop windows and locked doors to a swanky restaurant called The Marlin. The Marlin was old as money and had been the *It* spot of discerning socialites since Wallace's esteemed father was a junior senator taking lobbyists and fellow lawmakers out for highballs and graft.

Everyone was waiting inside at a collection of candlelit tables near the recessed end of the great varnished bar. People, already flushed with their martinis and bourbons and cocktails, rose to shake his hand and clap his back or hug him outright and they reeked of booze and perfume and hairspray and cigarettes and talked too loudly as they jostled for position around him. The Johnsons and Steiners attended as a unit, which made sense since so many of their kids were intermarried, it was exceedingly difficult to determine where the branches and the roots of the respective family trees ended or began; Barb and Michael Cotter; Mel Redfield, the former California poet laureate; old man Bloom, the former city councilman, and his nephew Regis, a tobacco lobbyist who kept rubbing his eyes and professing irritation at all the secondhand smoke; Skip Arden, doing his best John Huston as The Man from the South, in a vanilla suit hand-sewn by a Hong Kong tailor of legendary distinction; Jacob Wilson, recent heir to the Wilson fortune, who matched Skip in girth and verbosity, if not in taste or wit, and Jacob's bodyguard, Frank, a swarthy man in a bomber jacket who sat at the bar with Delaney and pretended inattentiveness to anything but the lone Rolling Rock beer he would order for the duration of the evening; Randy Freeman, wild-eyed behind rimless

glasses and dressed way down in a wrinkled polo shirt, khaki pants and sandals and his lovely, staid wife, Janice; the Jenson twins down from Bellevue, Ted and Russell who worked for Microsoft's public relations department—they were smooth as honey and slippery as eels; Jerry Premus, Wallace's hired gun in matters legal, who was twice as smooth and twice as slippery as the Jenson brothers combined; a couple of youngish unidentified women with big hair, skimpy gowns and glittering with the kind of semi-valuable jewelry Malloy's on State Avenue might rent by the evening; Wallace forgot their names on contact and figured they must be with a couple of the unattached men; and dear old Dad himself lurched from the confusion to kiss his cheek and mutter a gruff, how do ye do? Wallace looked over Dalton Smith's shoulder, counting faces and there were another half-dozen that he did not recognize and who knew if they were hangers-on or if his faculties were still utterly short-circuited. He decided to play it safe and put on his biggest movie-star grin for all concerned and bluff his way to the finish line.

Skip took charge of the event, dinging his glass of champagne to summon collective attention. He proposed a toast to Wallace's regenerative capabilities, his abundance of stalwart comrades and his continued speedy recovery, upon which all assembled cried, "Hear, hear!" and drank. No one mentioned Helen. She sat amongst them, nonetheless. Wallace, ensconced at the head of the main table like a king, with his most loyal advisers, Skip and Randy at either hand, saw her shadow in the faces that smiled too merrily and then concentrated with abject diligence on their salmon and baked potatoes in sour cream, or in the pitying expressions blocked by swiftly raised glasses of wine or the backs of hands as heads swiveled to engage neighbors in hushed conversation. Not that such clandestine tactics were necessary: Wallace's exhaustion, his entrenched apathy, precluded any intemperate outburst and Skip's thunderous elocution mercifully drowned out the details anyway.

Wallace was fairly saturated and so nursed his drink and picked at his birthday prime rib and tried to appear at least a ghost of his former gregarious self. Matters were proceeding apace until the fifth or six round of drinks arrived and Manny Steiner started in on Viet Nam and the encroachment of French and American factories upon traditional indigenous

agrarian cultures. Wallace suddenly feared he might do something rash. He set aside his glimmering knife, grinned and told Manny to hold that thought. He lurched to his feet, miraculously without upsetting a flotilla of tableware and half-full glasses, and made for the restrooms farther back where it was sure to be dim and quiet. Delaney, alert as any guard dog, cocked his head and then rose to follow, and subsided at a look from Wallace.

Wallace hesitated at the men's room, limped past it and pushed through the big metal door that let into the alley. The exit landing faced a narrow, dirty street and the sooty, featureless rear wall of Gossen's Fine Furniture. A sodium lamp illuminated a dumpster and a mound of black garbage bags piled at the bottom of the metal stairs. He sagged against the railing, fumbled out his cigarettes, got one going and smoked it almost convulsively. Restaurant noises pulsed dimly through the wall. Water dripped from the gutters and occasionally car horns echoed from blocks farther off, tires screeched and a woman laughed, high and maniacal—the mating cry of the hopelessly sloshed female.

He finished his cigarette and began another and was almost human again when someone called to him.

"Hey." The voice floated from the thicker shadows of the alley. It was a husky voice, its sex muted by the acoustics of the asphalt and concrete. "Hey, mister."

Wallace dragged on his cigarette and peered into the darkness. The muscles in his neck and shoulders bunched. His hand shook. He opened his mouth to answer that odd, muffled voice and could not speak. His throat was too tight. What did it remind him of? Something bad, something tickling the periphery of his consciousness, a warning. A certain quality of the voice, its inflection and cadence, harkened recollections of hunting for tigers in the high grass in India, of chopping like Pizarro through the Peruvian jungles on the trail of jaguars—of *being* hunted.

"Mister." The voice was close now. "I can see you. Please. *Prease*." The last word emerged in a patently affected accent, a mockery of the Asian dialect. A low, wheezy chuckle accompanied this. "*Prease, mistuh. You put a hotel in my rice paddy, mistuh*."

Wallace dropped his cigarette. He turned and groped for the door handle and it was slick with condensation. He pushed hard and the handle refused to budge. Locked. “Ah, sonofabitch!” He slumped against the door, face to the alley, and clutched his cane, wished like hell he had not been too lazy and vain to strap on one of his revolvers, which he never carried after the accident because the weight dragged on his shoulder. His heart lay thick and heavy. He gulped to catch his breath.

The sodium lamp dimmed. “*Mistuh Smith. Where you goin’ Mistuh Smith?”* Someone stood across the way, partially hidden by the angle of the building.

Jesus Christ, what is he wearing? Wallace could not quite resolve the details because everything was mired in varying shades of black, but the figure loomed very tall and very broad and was most definitely crowned with bizarre headgear reminiscent of a miter or a witch’s hat. Wallace’s drunkenness and terror peeled back in an instant of horrible clarity. Here was the figure which had appeared in his fever dreams—the ghastly, robed specter haunting the grounds of his estate. The lamp flickered and snuffed and Wallace was trapped in a cold black box. He reached back and began to slap the door feebly with his left hand.

“Wally. It is *soo* nice to meet you in the flesh.” The voice emanated from a spot near Wallace’s foot and it was easy to imagine the flabby, deranged face of a country bumpkin grinning up between the stairs. “Are you afraid? Are you afraid, sweetheart? Don’t be afraid… *boss man*. They’re about to cut the cake.”

Wallace slapped the door, slapped the door. It was as futile as tapping the hull of a battleship. A rancid odor wafted to him—the stench of fleshy rot and blood blackening in the belly of a sluice. “W-what do you want?”

“I want to show you something beautiful.”

“I’m—I’m not interested. No cash.”

“Father saw you that day. What Father sees, He covets. He covets you, Wally-dear.”

Wallace’s stomach dropped into his shoes. “Who are you?”

The other laughed, a low, moist chuckle of unwholesome satisfaction. “Me? A sorcerer. The shade of Tommy Tune. The Devil’s left hand. One of the inheritors of the Earth.” Something rattled on the steps. Fingernails, perhaps. “I am a digger of holes, an opener of doors. I am here to usher in the dark.” The odor grew more pungent. Glutted intestines left to swell in greenhouse heat; a city stockyard in July. Flies droned and complained. Flies were suddenly everywhere. “He lives in the cracks, Wally. The ones that run through everything. In the cracks between yesterday and tomorrow. Crawl into the dark, and there He is, waiting…”

“Look, I—just leave me alone, okay. Okay?” Wallace brushed flies from his hair, his lips and nose. “Don’t push me, fella.”

“Wifey met Him and you shall too. Everyone shall meet Him in good, sweet time. You’ll scream a hymn to the black joy He brings.”

Wallace lunged and thrust at the voice with his cane and struck a yielding surface. The cane was wrenched from his fingers with such violence his hand tore and bled. He stumbled and his traitorous hip gave way. He went to his knees, bruised them on the grating. Pain telescoped from his hip and stabbed his eyes—not quite the sense of broken bone, but it hurt, Christ did it ever. Fingers clamped onto his wrist and yanked him flat. The hand was huge and impossibly powerful and Wallace was stuck fast, his arm stretched over the edge of the landing and to the limits of his shoulder socket, his cheek pressed against metal. The dying remnants of his cigarette smoldered several inches from his eye. Sloppy, avaricious lips opened against his palm. The tongue was clammy and large as a preposterously gravid slug and it lapped between Wallace’s fingers and sucked them into a cavernous mouth.

Wallace thrashed and lowed like a cow that has been hamstrung. Teeth nicked him, might have snipped his fingers at the knuckle, he could tell from the size and sharpness of them. A great, Neolithic cannibal was making love to his hand. Then his hand slipped deeper, as the beast grunted and gulped and the mouth closed softly over his forearm, his elbow, and this couldn’t be possible, no way the esophageal sheath of a monstrous throat constricted around his biceps with such force his bones creaked together, no way that he was being swallowed alive, that he was going to disappear into the belly of a giant—

The world skewed out of focus.

The door jarred open and light and music surged from the restaurant interior. “Boss, they want to cut the cake… Boss! What the hell?” Delaney knelt beside him and rolled him over.

Wallace clutched his slick fingers against the breast of his suit and laughed hysterically. “I dropped my cane,” he said.

“What are you doing out here?” Delaney gripped Wallace’s forearms and lifted him to his feet. “You okay? Oh, jeez—you’re bleeding! You break anything?”

“Needed some air… I’m fine.” Wallace smiled weakly and sneaked a glance at the alley as he hurriedly wiped his face with his left sleeve. The lamp was still dead and the wedge of light from the open door did not travel far. He considered spilling his guts. Delaney would call the cops and the cops would find what? Nothing and then they would ask to see his prescription and probably ask if he should be mixing Demerol with ten different kinds of booze. Oh, and by the way, what really happened in that barn. Go on: you can tell us. “I’m okay. Slipped is all.”

Delaney leaned over the railing and peered down. “I’ll go find your cane __”

“No! I, uh, busted it. Cheap wood.”

“Cheap wood! Know what I shelled out for that?”

“No, really. I’m freezing. We’ll get a new one tomorrow.”

Delaney did not appear convinced. “It broke?”

“Yeah. C’mon, Dee. Let’s go and get this party over with, huh?”

“That’s the spirit, Mr. S,” Delaney steadied him and said no more, but Wallace noticed he did not remove his hand from his pocket until they were safely inside and among friends.

6

The remainder of the evening dragged to pieces like old fearful Hector come undone behind Achilles’ cart and eventually Wallace was home and

unpacked from the car. He collapsed into bed and was asleep before Delaney clicked off the lights.

Wallace dreamt of making love to Helen again.

They occupied a rocky shelf above Sun Devil Stadium, screwing like animals on a scratchy Navajo blanket. It was dusk, the stadium was deserted. Helen muttered into the blanket. Wallace pulled her ponytail to raise her head, because he thought he heard a familiar syllable or phrase. Something guttural, something darksome. His passion cooled to a ball of pig iron in his belly. The night air grew bitter, the stars sharp.

Helen said in a metallic voice, *There is a hole no man can fill*.

Wallace flew awake and sat pop-eyed and gasping. Clock said 3:39 a.m. He got out of bed, switched on the lamp and slumped in its bell of dull light, right hand tucked against his chest. His hand was thickly bandaged and it itched. The contours of the bedroom seemed slightly warped, window frames and doorways were too skinny and pointy. The floor was cold. The lamp bulb imploded, with a sizzle that nearly stopped his heart and darkness rushed in like black water filling a muddy boot print.

He did not feel welcome.

Delaney stood in the kitchen eating a sandwich over the sink. He was stripped to the waist. “You want me to fix you one?” he asked when Wallace padded in. He lived in the old gardener’s cottage, used a second key to come and go as he pleased. Wallace had contemplated asking him to move into the downstairs guestroom and decided it was too much of an imposition. Delaney had women over from the clubs; he enjoyed loud music. Best to leave him at the end of a long leash.

Wallace waved him off, awkwardly poured a glass of milk with his left hand, sloshed in some rum from an emergency bottle in a counter drawer. He held his glass with trembling fingers, eyeballing the slimy bubbles before they slid into his mouth; poured another. He leaned against the stainless steel refrigerator. The kitchen was designed for professional use—Beth had retained a chef on the payroll for awhile. That was when the Smith House was the epicenter of cocktail socials and formal banquets. The mayor and his entourage had attended on several occasions. The middleweight champion of the world. A porn star and his best girl. With people like that

dropping in, you had better have a chef. Anymore, Delaney did the cooking. Delaney, king of cold cuts.

Wallace said, “How’d you get that one?” He meant the puckered welt on Delaney’s ribcage.

Delaney scraped his plate in the sink, ran the tap. “I was a pretty stupid kid,” he said.

“And all that’s changed?”

Delaney said, “Des Moines is a tough town. We were tough kids. A big crew. We caused some trouble. People got hurt.”

Wallace knew about Delaney’s record, his history of violence, the prisons he had toured. He knew all that in a peripheral way, but had never pried into Delaney’s past, never dug up the nitty-gritty details. Guys like him, you left well enough alone. The confession did not surprise him. It was Delaney’s nature and a large reason why Wallace hired him when the investment money began to attract unwanted attention. Delaney knew exactly how to deal with people who gave Wallace grief.

Delaney sat on a stool, arms crossed. He directed his gaze at the solid black window, which gave back only curved reflections of the room and its haggard occupants. “Most of us went to the pen, or died. Lots of drinking, lots of dope. Everybody carried. I got shot for the first time when I was sixteen. We knocked over this pool hall on the South End—me and Lonnie Chavez and Ruby Pharaoh. Some guy popped up and put two .32 slugs through my chest. The hospital was a no-go, so Ruby Pharaoh and Chavez loaded me in Ruby’s caddy and took me to a field. Chavez’s dad was an Army corpsman; he lifted some of his old man’s meds and performed home surgery.” The small man shook his head with a wry grin. “Hell, it was like the old Saturday matinee westerns we watched as kids—Chavez heating up his knife with a Zippo and Ruby pouring Wild Turkey all over my chest. Hurt like a sonofabitch, let me say. Chavez hid me in a chicken coop until the whole thing blew over. I was real weak, so he fed me. Changed my bandages, brought me comic books and cigs. I never had a brother.”

“Me neither,” Wallace said. “Mine was too young and I left home before he got outta diapers. But I gotta be honest, I always thought of you as a son.”

“You ain’t my daddy, Mr. S. You’re too rich to be my daddy. You like the young pussy, though. He did too and it caused him no end of trouble.”

“That cop was by today.”

“Yeah.”

“He seems edgy. Seems worried.”

“Yeah.”

“Dee, when you came into the barn, did you see anything, I don’t know, weird?” Wallace hesitated. “Besides the obvious, I mean. These burns on my back; I can’t figure how I got them. And what happened to the horse?”

Delaney shrugged. “What’s the matter, Mr. S? Cop got you spooked too?”

“I don’t need him for that.” Wallace placed his glass in the sink. “What happened to the horse, Dee?”

“I blew its head off, Boss.” Delaney lighted a cigarette, passed it to Wallace, fired another and smoked it between his middle and fourth fingers, palm slightly cupped to his lips. During the reign of Beth, smoking had been forbidden in the house. Didn’t matter anymore.

“I want cameras in tomorrow. Get Savage over here, tell him I’ve seen the light,” Wallace said.

“Cameras, huh.”

“Look… I’ve seen somebody sneaking around at night. I suspected I was hallucinating and maybe that’s all it is. I think one of the Choates is around.”

“Dogs woulda ripped his balls off.”

“I want the cameras. That’s it.”

“Okay. Where?”

“Where… the gate, for certain. Front door. Pool building. Back yard. We don’t use the tool shed. Savage can run everything through there. Guess I’ll need to hire a security guy—”

“A couple of guys.”

“A couple of guys, right. Savage can take care of that too.”

“It’ll be a job. A few days, at least.”

“Yeah? Well, sooner he gets started…”

“Okay. Is that all?”

Wallace nodded. “For now. I haven’t decided. Night, Dee.”

“Night, Boss.”

7

Billy Savage of Savage and Sons came in before noon the following day and talked to Delaney about Wallace’s latest security needs. Savage had silver, greased down hair, a golfer’s tan and a denture-perfect smile. Wallace watched from his office window as Savage and Delaney walked around the property. Savage took notes on a palm-sized computer while Delaney pointed at things. It took about an hour. Savage left and returned after lunch with three vans loaded with men and equipment. Delaney came into the office and gave Wallace a status report. The guys would be around for two or three days if all went according to plan. Savage had provided him a list of reliable candidates for security guards. Wallace nodded blearily. He was deep into a bottle of blue label Stoli by then. He’d told Delaney he trusted his judgment—*Hire whoever you want, Dee. Tell Cecil to leave Helen be for a while. I’m sick of that screaming*.

She’s asleep, Mr. S. They doped her up last night and she’s been dead to the world ever since.

Oh. Wallace rubbed his eyes and it was night again. He lolled in his leather pilot’s chair and stared out at the cruel stars and the shadows of the trees. “You have to do something, Wally, old bean. You really do.” He nodded solemnly and took another swig. He fumbled around in the dark for the phone and finally managed to thumb the right number on his speed dialer. Lance Pride, of the infamous Pride Agency, sounded as if he had been going a few rounds with a bottle himself. But the man sobered rather swiftly when he realized who had called him at this *god-awful* hour. “Wallace. What’s wrong?”

Wallace said, “It’s about the accident.”

“Yeah. I thought it might be.” And after nearly thirty seconds of silence, Pride said, “Exactly what do you want? Maybe we should do this in person

__”

“No, no, nothing heavy,” Wallace said. “Write me the book on the Choates. Forward and back.”

Pride laughed bleakly and replied that would make for some unpleasant bedtime reading, but not to worry. “Are we looking at… ahem, payback?” He had visited the hospital, sent flowers, etcetera. Back in the olden days, when Wallace was between wives and Pride had only gotten started, they frequented a few of the same seedy haunts and closed down their share. Of course, if Wallace wanted satisfaction over what had happened to Helen, he need but ask. Friend discount and everything. The detective was not a strong-arm specialist per se, however he had a reputation for diligence and adaptation. Before the arrival of Delaney, Wallace had employed him to acquire the goods on more than one recalcitrant landowner—and run off a couple that became overly vengeful. Pride was not fussy about his methods; a quality that rendered him indispensable. “I’ll skin your cat, all right,” was his motto.

Wallace thanked him and disconnected. He stared into darkness, listening for the strange, intermittent cries from his wife’s room.

8

It was a busy week. On Tuesday, Doctor Green paid a visit, shined a light in his eyes and took his pulse and asked him a lot of pointed questions and wrote a prescription for sleeping pills and valium. Doctor Green wagged his finger and admonished him to return to physical therapy—Hesse, the massively thewed therapist at the Drover Clinic had tattled regarding Wallace’s spotty attendance. Wednesday, the hospital sent a private ambulance for Helen and whisked her off to her monthly neurological examination. She came home in the afternoon with a heart monitor attached to her chest. Kate told Wallace it was strictly routine, they simply wanted to collect data. She smiled a fake smile when she said it and he was grateful.

He sat with Helen for a couple of hours in the afternoons while Kate did laundry and made the bed and filled out the reams of paperwork necessary to the documentation of Helen’s health care service. Helen was losing weight. There were circles beneath her vacant eyes and she smelled sick in

the way an animal does when it stops eating and begins to waste from the inside. There was also the crack in her face. The original small fracture had elongated into a moist fissure. Wallace gazed in queasy fascination at the pink, crusty furrow that began at her hairline and closed her right eye and blighted her cheekbone. The doctors had no explanation for the wound or its steady encroachment. They had taken more blood and run more scans, changed some medications and increased the dosage of others and indicated in the elegant manner of professional bearers of bad tidings that it was a crap shoot.

Meanwhile, men in coveralls traipsed all over the grounds setting up alarms and cameras; Delaney interviewed a dozen or so security guard applicants from the agency Billy Savage recommended.

Wallace observed from the wings, ear glued to the phone while his subordinates in Seattle and abroad informed him about the status of his various acquisitions and investments. His team was soldiering on quite adequately and he found his attention wandering to more immediate matters: securing his property from the depredations of that ghoulish figure and getting to the bottom of the Choate mystery.

Pride had the instincts of a blue ribbon bird dog and he did not disappoint Wallace's expectations. The detective only required three days to track down an eyewitness to history, one Kurt Bruenig of the Otter Creek Bruenigs.

"The Choates were unsavory, you bet." Kurt Bruenig wiped his mustache, took a long sip of ice tea. A barrel of a man, with blunt fingers, his name stitched on the breast of an oil-stained coverall. His wrecker was parked outside their window booth of the Lucky Bucket in downtown Olympia. "Nasty folk, if you must know. Why *do* you want to know, Mr. Smith?"

Wallace's skull felt like a soccer ball. He cracked the seal on a packet of aspirin and stirred seltzer water in a shabby plastic drinking glass. He swallowed the aspirin and chased them with the seltzer and held on tight while his guts seesawed into the base of his throat.

"Somethin' wrong?"

"How's your lunch?" Wallace gestured at the man's demolished fish and chips basket.

“Fine.”

“Yes? How’s the fat check you got in your pocket? Look, there’s more in it for you, but I’m asking, and my business is mine.” Wallace caught Delaney’s eye at the bar, and Delaney resumed watching the Dodgers clobber the Red Sox on the big screen.

“Hey, no problem.” Bruenig shrugged affably. Tow truck drivers dealt with madmen on a daily basis. “The Choates… our homestead was the next one over, butted up against Otter Creek.”

“Pretty area,” Wallace said. He placed a small recorder on the table and adjusted the volume. “Please speak clearly, Mr. Bruenig. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Uh, no. Sure. It went to hell. Anyways, they were around before us, ’bout 1895. My great-granddaddy pitched his tent in 1910. Those old boys were cats ’n’ dogs from the get-go. The Choates were Jews—claimed to be Jews. Had some peculiar customs that didn’t sit well with my kin, what with my kin bein’ Baptists and all. Not that my great-granddaddy was the salt of the earth, mind you—he swindled his way into our land from what I’ve been told. I suppose a fair amount of chicanery watered my family tree. We come from Oklahoma and Texas, originally. Those as stayed behind got rich off of cattle and oil. Those of us as headed west, you see what we did with ourselves.” He nodded at the wrecker, wiped his greasy fingers on a napkin. “My dad and his tried their hands at farmin’. Pumpkins, cabbage. Had a Christmas tree farm for a few years. Nothin’ ever came of it. My sister inherited when my dad passed away. She decided it wasn’t worth much, sold out to an East Coast fella. Same as bought the Choate place. But the Choates, they packed it in first. Back in ’83—right after their house burned down. We heard one of ’em got drunk and knocked over a lantern. Only thing survived was the barn. Like us, there weren’t many of them around at the end. Morgan, he was the eldest. His kids, Hank and Carlotta—they were middle-aged, dead now. Didn’t see ’em much. Then there was Josh and Tyler. I was in school with those two. Big, big boys. They played line on a couple football teams that took state.”

“How big would you say they were?” Wallace asked.

“Aw, that’s hard to say. Josh, he was the older one, the biggest. Damned near seven foot tall. And thick—pig farmers. I remember bumpin’ into Josh at the fillin’ station, probably four years outta high school. He was a monster. I saw him load a fifty-five-gallon drum into the back of his flatbed. Hugged it to his chest and dropped it on the tailgate like nothin’. He moved out to the Midwest, somewhere. Lost his job when the brewery went tits-up. Tyler, he’s doin’ a hard stretch in Walla Walla. Used to be a deputy in the Thurston County Sheriff’s department. Got nailed for accessory to murder and child pornography. You remember that brouhaha about the ring of devil worshipers supposed to operate all over Olympia and Centralia? They say a quarter of the department was involved, though most of it got hushed by the powers that be. He was one of those unlucky assholes they let dangle in the wind.”

Wallace hadn’t paid much attention to that scandal. In those days he had been in the throes of empire building and messy divorces. He said, “That’s what you meant by nasty folk?”

“I mean they were dirty. Not dirt under the nails from honest labor, either. I’m talkin’ ’bout sour—piss and blood and old grotty shit on their coveralls. Josh and Tyler came to school smellin’ half dead, like they’d slaughtered pigs over the weekend and not bothered to change. Nobody wanted to handle their filthy money when they paid down to the feed store. As for the devil worshiping, maybe it’s true, maybe not. The Satanist rap was sort of the cherry on top, you might say. The family patriarch, Kaleb Choate, was a scientist, graduated from a university in Europe. It was a big deal in the 1890s and people in these parts were leery on account of that. A Jew *and* a scientist? That was askin’ a bit much. He worked with Tesla—y’know, the Tesla coil guy. My understanding is Tesla brought him to America to work in his laboratory and didn’t cotton to him and they had a fallin’ out, but I dunno much about all that. One more weird fact, y’know? Wasn’t long before rumors were circulatin’ ’bout how old man Choate was robbin’ crypts down to the Oddfellows Cemetery and performin’ unnatural experiments on farm animals and Chinamen. We had a whole community of those Chinese and they weren’t popular, so nobody got too riled if one turned up missin’, or what-have-you. And a bunch of ’em did disappear. Authorities claimed they moved to Seattle and Tacoma where the big

Chinese communities were, or that they sailed back to China and just forgot to tell anybody, or that they ran off and got themselves killed trespassing. Still, there were rumors and by the time my great-granddaddy arrived, Kaleb Choate's farm was considered off limits for good honest Christians. 'Course there was more. Some people took it into their heads that Choate was a wizard or a warlock, that he came from a long line of black magicians. There were a few, like the Teagues on Waddel Creek and the Bakkers over to the eastern Knob Hills, who swore he could mesmerize a fella by lookin' into his eyes, that he could fly, that he fed those Chinamen to demons in return for… well, there it kinda falls apart. The Choates had land and that was about it. They were dirt poor when I was a kid—sorta fallen into ruin, y'might say. If Old Poger made a bargain with 'em, then they got royally screwed from the looks of it. I wonder 'bout the flyin' part on account of my sister and her boyfriend, Wooly Clark, claimed Josh could levitate like those yogis in the Far East, swore to Jesus they saw him do it in the woods behind the school once when they were necking. But hell, I dunno. My sister, she's a little soft in the brain, so there's no tellin' what she did or didn't see…

"Anyhow, the Bruenigs and the Choates had this sort of simmerin' feud through the years—Kaleb kicked the bucket in the '40s, but our families kept fightin'. Property squabbles, mainly. Their pigs caused some problems, came onto our land and destroyed my grandma's garden more than once. The kids on both sides liked to cause trouble, beat hell out of each other whenever they could. I guess the grown men pulled that too. My uncles got in a brawl with some of the Choates at the Lucky Badger; all of 'em were eighty-six'd for life and Uncle Clover did a month in the county lockup for bustin' a guy over the noggin with a chair."

Wallace said, "So, did you ever notice anything unusual going on?"

"You mean, like was the deal with Tyler an isolated incident or were the old rumors all true? Maybe we had a bona fide witch coven next door?"
Bruenig shook his head. "There were some strange happenin's, I'll grant. More complicated than witches, though."

"Complicated?"

“That’s right, partner. Look at the history, you’ll notice a few of the Choates were eggheads. Heck of a deal to be an egghead yet spend your whole life on a farm, isn’t it? Buncha friggin’ cloistered monks—unnatural. You had Kaleb’s son, Morgan, he owned the land until they sold out and he was a recluse, nobody ever saw him, but I heard tell he was an astronomer, wrote a book or somethin’. Then you got Paul Choate—Dr. Creepy, the kids called him; he taught physics at Evergreen in the ’70s and did some research for NASA. But he wasn’t even the smartest of the litter. We knew at least three more of those guys coulda done the same. Hell, Josh was a genius in school. He just hated class; bored him. Me, I always thought they were contacted by aliens. That’s why they all acted so weird.”

“You’re shitting me,” Wallace said.

“No, sir. You gonna sit there and tell me you don’t believe in the ETs? This is the twenty-first century, pal. You oughta read Carl Sagan.”

“You read Carl Sagan?”

“’Cause I drive a wrecker I’m a dumbass? Read Sagan, there’s plenty of funky stuff goin’ on in the universe.”

“Okay, okay,” Wallace said. “Tell me about the aliens.”

“Like I said, it goes all the way back to the beginnin’, if you pay attention. Within a decade of Kaleb Choate’s arrival, folks started reportin’ peculiar sightin’s. Goat men in the Waddel Creek area, two-headed calves, lights over the Capitol Forest—no airplanes to explain that away. Not then. People saw UFOs floatin’ around the Choate fields month after month in 1915 and 1916, right when the action in Europe was gettin’ heavy. Some of it’s in the papers, some it was recorded by the police department and private citizens, the library. It’s a puzzle. You find a piece here and there, pretty quick things take shape. Anyhow, this went on into the ’50s and ’60s, but by then the entire country was in the middle of the saucer scare, so the authorities assumed mass hysteria. There were still disappearances too, except now it wasn’t the Chinese—the Chinese had moseyed to greener pastures by the late ’40s. Nope, this was mostly run-of-the-mill, God-fearin’ townies. Don’t get me wrong, we aren’t talking ’bout bus loads. Three or four kids, a couple wives, a game warden and a census taker, some campers. More than our share of bums dropped off the face of the earth, but you know that

didn’t amount to a hill of beans. These disappearances are spread thin. Like somebody, or somethin’ was bein’ damn careful not to rouse the natives.

“Of course, as a kid I was all-fired curious ’bout morbid crap, pestered my dad constantly. I pried a little out of him; more I learned Hardy Boys style. Got to tell you, my daddy wouldn’t talk ’bout the Choates if he could help it; he’d spit when someone mentioned ’em. Me and my sister got ambitious and dug into the dirty laundry. We even spied on ’em. Mighty funny how often they used to get visitors from town. Rich folks. Suits from the Capitol drove out there. Real odd, considerin’ the Choates have always been looked down on as white trash—homegrown eggheads or not. That’s what got me thinkin’. That and I saw Morgan and his boys diggin’ in their fields at night.”

“Mass graves?” Wallace said dryly.

Bruenig barked a wad of phlegm into his basket. “Huh! Better believe it crossed my mind. Told my pappy and his eyes got hard. Seems granddad saw ’em doin’ the same thing in *his* day. Near as we could tell they were laying pipe or cable, all across their property. They owned about three thousand acres, so there’s miles of it, whatever it is. Then there were the pylons—”

“Pylons. Where’d you see those?” Wallace’s interest sharpened.

“Farther back on their land. Long time ago a road wound around there—it’s overgrown now, but when it was cleared there were these rocks sittin’ out in the middle of nowhere. Sorta like that Stonehenge deal, except it was just one or two in each field. Jesse, my sister, counted twenty of ’em scattered ’round. She said they looked like peckers, and I have to admit they did bear a resemblance.”

“Any idea who made them?”

“No. I mentioned it to a young geologist fella, worked for the BLM. He got interested, said he was gonna interview the Choates, see if they’d built on tribal grounds. Never heard from him again, though. He was barkin’ up the wrong tree anyway. Those rocks are huge; least two tons each. How the Indians supposed to move that kinda load? Otter Creek—*puhlease.* Not in your lifetime. Plus, I never seen rock looked like those pylons. We don’t have obsidian ’round here. Naw, those things are ancient and the ETs

shipped ’em in from somewhere else. Probably markers, like pyramids and crop circles. Then the Choates come along and use ’em to communicate with the aliens. Help ’em with their cattle mutilations and their abductions. Don’t ask me why the aliens need accomplices. No way we’ll ever understand what makes a Gray tick.”

Wallace turned off the recorder, slipped it in his pocket. “Is that all, Mr. Bruenig? Anything else you want to add that I might find useful?”

“Well, sir, I reckon I don’t truly know what that could be. My advice is to steer clear of the Choate place, if you’re thinkin’ of muckin’ ’round that way. You aren’t gonna find any arrowheads or souvenirs worth your time. Don’t know that I hold with curses, but that land’s gotta shadow over it. I sure as hell don’t poke my nose around there.”

9

Wallace’s favorite was the dead woman on the rocker.

Beth had hated it, said the artist, a local celebrity named Miranda Carson, used too much wax. The sculpture was indeed heavy, it required two burly movers to install it in the gallery. Wallace did not care, he took morbid pleasure in admiring the milky eyes, the tangled strands of real hair the artist collected from her combs. In low light, the wax figure animated, transformed into a young woman, knees drawn to chin, meditating upon the woods behind the house, the peacocks and the other things that lurked. Wallace once loaned the piece, entitled *Remembrance*, to the UW library; brought it home after an earthquake shattered an arm and damaged the torso. Carson had even driven over and performed a hasty repair job. The cracks were still evident, like scars. Macabre and beautiful.

The gallery was populated by a dozen other sculptures, a menagerie orphaned by Beth’s departure and Wallace’s general disinterest. Wallace wandered among them, cell phone glued to his ear, partially aware of Skip’s buzzing baritone. Wallace thought the split in the dead girl’s body seemed deeper. More jagged.

“—so Randy and I’ll go today. Unless you want to come. Might be what you need.”

“Say again?” Wallace allowed himself to be drawn into the cathode. It dawned on him that he had made a serious tactical error in confiding the Bruenig interview to Skip. They had discussed the Choate legend over drinks the prior evening and Wallace more than half-expected his friend to laugh, shake his snowy head and call him a damn fool for chasing his tail. Instead, Skip had kept mum and sat stroking his beard with a grim, thoughtful expression. Now, after a night’s sleep, the story had gestated and hatched as a rather dubious scheme to nip Wallace’s anxieties at their roots.

“Randy and I’ll scope out that property this afternoon. He wants to see that nest you were going on about at the hospital. He said it sounds weird. I told him it’s dried up. He refuses to listen, of course.”

“Wait—wait.” Wallace rubbed his temple. “You plan to go to the barn.”

“Uh-hmm, right.”

“To what—look at the nest?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying. I’m thinking noon, one o’clock. We’ll have dinner at the Oyster House. It’s lobster night.”

“Lobster night, yeah. Skip?”

“What?”

“Forget about the nest. You’re right, it won’t be there, they migrate, I think. And the barn’s condemnable, man. It’s dangerous. Scary people hang around—maybe druggies, I dunno. Bad types.” Wallace’s hand was slippery. He was afraid he might drop the phone.

“Oh yeah? Well it just so happens I called Lyle Ferguson—your old pal Lyle, remember him? He landed the bid and he says they’re planning to commence tearing down the barn and all that sort of thing on Monday or Tuesday. So time is of the essence, as they say.”

“Skip—”

“Hey, Wally. I’m driving here. You don’t want to come with us?” Skip’s voice crackled.

“No. Uh, say hi to Fergie, if you see him.”

“Okay, buddy. I’m driving, I gotta go. Call you tomorrow.” *Click.*

“Uh, huh.” Wallace regarded a bust on a plinth. It was the half-finished head of a woman wearing thick lipstick. A crack had begun to divide the plaster face.

He had had Pride check into Bruenig’s story about the BLM geologist and the monoliths. The geologist was named Chuck Doolittle and he abruptly quit his post six years ago, dropped everything and departed the state of Washington, although nobody at the department had a handle on where he might have emigrated. As for the so-called monoliths, the bureau disavowed knowledge of any such structures and while the former Choate property did overlap tribal grounds, it had long ago been legally ceded to the county. No mystery at all.

The only hitch, insomuch as Pride was concerned, was the fact certain records pertaining to the Choate farm were missing from the county clerk’s office. According to a truncated file index, the Choate folder once contained numerous photos of unidentified geological formations, or possibly manmade constructs of unknown origin. The series began in 1927, the latter photographs being dated as late as 1971. Pride located eight black-and-white pictures taken in 1954 through 1959 that displayed some boulders and indistinct earth heaves akin to the Mima Mounds. Unfortunately, the remainder of the series, some ninety-eight photos, was missing and unaccounted for since an office fire at the old courthouse in ’79.

Wallace went into Helen’s suite, waited near the door while Cecil massaged Helen’s cramped thigh muscles. Kate had arrived early. The burly nurse dabbed Helen’s brow with a wash cloth and murmured encouragement. Helen’s fish-black eyes rolled with blindness and fear. There was nothing of comprehension or sanity in them and the cleft in her forehead and cheek was livid as a gangrenous brand. She howled and howled without inflection, the flat repeating utterance of an institutionalized mind.

Wallace limped upstairs to his office, turned up the radio. His hip throbbed fiercely; sympathy pangs. His hand itched with fading scabs. What had happened to him that night in the alley behind the Marlin? What was happening now? He found some Quaaludes in a drawer, chased them with a healthy belt of JD and put his head down in his arms, a kindergartner again.

Wallace was standing in Skip’s dining room. Wallace’s feet were nailed down with railroad spikes.

“Why’d you let them go?” Delaney asked. He slouched against a cabinet and smoked a cigarette.

Watery light washed out the details. Randy’s prosthesis shined upon the table, plastic fingers blooming in a vase. A two-inch crack separated the fancy tiled ceiling. There was movement inside. Squirming.

Skip swaggered from the kitchen and plunged oversized hands into a bowl of limp, yellow noodles. He drew forth a clump, steaming and dripping, plopped it on his head as a wig. Grinned the wacky grin of a five-year-old stoned out of his gourd on cough syrup.

“Why are you doing that?” Wallace tried to modulate his voice; his voice was scratchy, was traitorously shrill.

Skip drooled and capered, shook fistfuls of noodles like pompoms.

Wallace said, “Where’s Randy? Skip, is Randy here?”

“Nope.”

“Where is he?”

“With the god of the barn-b-barn—b-barn barn barn barn!”

“Skip, where’s Randy?”

“In the barn with Bay-el, Bay-el, Bay-el. Playing a game.” Skip hummed a ditty to his noodles, cast Wallace a sidelong glance of infinite slyness. “Snufalupagus LOVES raw spaghetti. No sauce, no way! I pretend it’s worms. Worms get big, Wallace. You wouldn’t believe how big some worms get. Worms crawl inside your guts and make babies. They crawl up your nose, your ears, into your mouth. If somebody grinds you into itty-bitty pieces and a worm eats you, it’ll know all the stuff you did.” He lowered his voice. “They can crawl up your butt and make ya do the hula dance and jabber like Margie Thatcher on crack!”

“Where’s Randy?”

“Playing sock puppets.” Skip began ramming noodles down his throat. “He’s Kermit de Frog!”

“Should’ve stopped them, Boss. Now they’ve stirred up the wasps’ nest. You’re fucked.” Delaney stubbed his cigarette and walked through the wall.

Wallace awoke in darkness, fearful and disoriented. He had drunkenly migrated to his bedroom at some fuzzy period and burrowed into the covers. He remembered long, narrow corridors, bloody nebulas splattered against leaded glass and Kirlian figures scorched into the walls: skeletal fragments of clawing hands and gaping mouths.

Wallace, Helen said. She was there with him in the room, wedged high in the corner of the walls where they joined the ceiling. She gleamed white as bone and her eyes and mouth and the crack in her face were black as the pits between the stars. *There’s a hole you can’t fill*, she said.

Wallace screamed in his throat, a mangled, pathetic cry. The clouds moved across the moon and reshaped the shadows on the wall and Helen was not hanging there with her black black eyes, her covetous mouth, or the stygian worm that fed on her face. There were only moonbeams and the reflections of branches like skinned fingers against the plaster.

Wallace lay trembling. Eventually he drifted away and slept with the covers over his head. He flinched at the chorus of night sounds, each knock upon the door.

11

“Skip. Are you eating? Where’ve you been?”

“Nothing, Wallace. I’m tired.”

“Skip, it’s three. I’ve been calling for hours. Why don’t you come over.”

“Ahh, no thanks. I’m gonna sleep a while. I’m tired.”

“Skip.”

“Yeah?”

“Where’s Randy? He doesn’t answer his phone.”

“Dunno. Try him at the office. Little bastard’s always working late.”

“I tried his office, Skip.”

“Okay. That’s right. He’s out of town. On business.”

“Business. What kind of business?”

“Dunno. Business.”

“Where did he go, exactly? Skip? Skip, you still there?”

“Dunno. He won’t be around much, I guess. There’s a lot of business.”

“Skip—”

“Wallace, I gotta sleep, now. Talk to you later. I’m very tired.”

12

Wallace sat on the steps, new cane across his knees, Bruno and Thor poised at his flanks like statuary come alive. The sun bled red and gold. The trees would be getting green buds any day now. He listened to the birds mating in the branches. The graveyard-shift security guard, a gray, melancholy fellow named Tom, was going off-duty. He came over to smoke a cigarette and introduce himself to his new boss. He was a talker, this dour, gaunt Tom. He used to drive school buses until his back went south—lower lumbar was a killer, yessiree. He was an expert security technician. Twenty-four years on the job; he had seen everything. The other two guys, Charlie and Dante, were kids, according to Tom. He promised to keep an eye on them for Wallace, make certain they were up to standard. Wallace said thanks and asked Tom to bring him the nightly surveillance video. The guard asked if he meant all four of them and Wallace considered that a moment before deciding, no, only the video feed from the garden area. Tom fetched it from the guard shack and handed it over without comment. The look on his face sufficed—he was working for a lunatic.

Wallace plugged the CD into the player on his theater-sized plasma television in the den. He called Randy’s house and talked to Janice while silent, grainy night images flickered on the screen. Janice said Randy had left a cryptic message on the answering machine and nothing since. He had rambled about taking a trip and signed off by yelling, *Hallucigenia! Hallucigenia sparsa! It’s a piece of something bigger—waaay bigger, honey!* Janice was unhappy. Randy had pulled crazy stunts before. He dodged lengthy stays in Federal penitentiaries as a college student and she had been there for the entire, wild ride. She expected the phone to ring at

any moment and him to be in prison, or a hospital. What if he tried to sneak into Cuba again? What if he blew off his other hand? Who was going to wipe his ass then? Wallace reassured her that nothing of the sort was going to happen and made her promise to call when she heard anything.

Lance Pride dropped in to report his progress. Pride was lanky, a one-time NBA benchwarmer back in the ’70s. He dressed in stale tweeds and emanated a palpable sense of repressed viciousness. His eyes were hard and small. He glanced at the video on the television and did not comment.

Pride confessed Joshua Choate appeared to be a dead end. His last known residence was a trailer court on the West Side of Olympia and he had abandoned the premises about three years ago. The former Ph.D. farm boy had not applied for a driver’s license, a credit card, a job application or anything else. Maybe he was living on the street somewhere, maybe he had skipped the country, maybe he was dead. Nobody had seen him lately, of that much Pride was certain.

Pride strewed a bundle of newspaper clippings on the coffee table, artifacts he had unearthed pertaining to Paul, Tyler and Josh: stories detailing the promotion of Tyler Choate and a file picture of the young deputy sheriff grinning as he loomed near a Thurston County police cruiser and another of him shackled and bracketed by guards after he had been exposed as a mastermind cultist; a shot of Joshua when he had been selected as an all-American tackle—his wide, flabby face was nearly identical to his brother’s; articles from the mid-’60s following Paul Choate’s hiring at the newly founded Evergreen State College and his brief and largely undocumented collaboration with NASA regarding cosmic microwave background radiation. There were school records for Tyler and Josh—four-point-oh students and standout football players. Major universities had courted them with every brand of scholarship. Tyler did his time at Washington State, majored in psychology, perfect grades, but no sports, and joined the sheriff’s department. Meanwhile, Josh earned a degree in physics at Northwestern, advanced degrees in theoretical physics from Caltech and MIT and then dropped off the radar forever. Tyler eventually became implicated in a never fully explained scandal involving Satanism and rape and got dropped in a deep, dark hole. The only other curious detail regarding the younger brothers was the fact both of them had been banned

from every casino within two hundred miles of Olympia. None of the joints ever caught them cheating, but they were unstoppable at the blackjack tables and the houses became convinced the boys counted cards.

None of it seemed too useful and Wallace barely skimmed the surface items before conceding defeat and shoving the pile aside. Pride just smiled dryly and said he'd make another pass at things. He had a lead on the company that had sold the Choates a ton of fabricated metals in the '60s and '70s. Unfortunately the company had gone under, but he was looking into former employees. He told Wallace to hang onto the newspaper clippings and left with a promise to check in soon.

Wallace moped around the house, mixing his vodka with lots of orange juice in a feeble genuflection toward sobriety. He picked up the newspaper photo of Josh Choate aged seventeen, in profile with his shoulder pads on. He wore a slight smile and his pixilated eye was inscrutable. *I am a loyal son. I am here to usher in the dark.*

The day was bright and hot like it often was in Western Washington during the spring. The garden filled the television with static gloom. Upstairs, Helen began to scream. Wallace was out of orange juice.

He called Lyle Ferguson. The contractor was cordial as ever. He was moving crews into the Otter Creek Housing Development, AKA the old Choate place as of that morning. Yeah, Skip Arden had called him, sure; asked whether he could nose around the property. No problem, Ferguson had said, just don't trip and break anything. Pylons? Oh, yeah they found some rocks on the site. Nothing a bulldozer couldn't handle…

13

The next day Wallace became impatient and had Delaney drive him to the branch office of Fish and Wildlife. Short visit. Randy Freeman's supervisor told Wallace that Randy had two months vacation saved. The lady thought perhaps he had gone to Canada. Next, he phoned the number Detective Adams gave him and got the answering machine. He hit the number for the front desk and was told Detective Adams was on sick leave—would he care to leave a message or talk to another officer?

Wallace sat in the rear of the Bentley, forehead pressed against the glass as they waited in traffic beside Sylvester Park. Two lean, sun-dried prostitutes washed each other's hair in the public drinking fountain. Nearby, beat cops with faces the shade of raw flank steak loomed over a shirtless man sprawled in the grass. The man laughed and flipped the cops off and a pug dog yapped raucously at the end of a rope tied to the man's belt.

Delaney chewed on a toothpick. He said, "Boss, where are we going with this?"

Wallace shrugged and wiped his face, his neck. His thoughts were shrill and inchoate.

"Well, I don't think it's a good idea," Delaney said.

"You should've kept feeding me my pills. Then we wouldn't be sitting here."

"You need to see a shrink. This is what they call the grieving process."

"Think I'm in the denial stage?"

"I don't know what stage to call it. You aren't doing so hot. You're running in circles." The car moved again. Delaney drove with the window rolled down, his arm on the frame. "Your wife isn't going to recover. It's a bitch and it hurts, I know. But she isn't going to come around, Mr. S. She won't ever be the woman you married. And you got to face that fact, look it dead in the eye. 'Cause, till you do, whatever screws are rattling loose in your head are going to keep on rattling." He glanced over at Wallace. "I'm sorry to say that. I'm real sorry."

"Don't be sorry." Wallace smiled, thin and sad. "Just stick with me if you can. I'll talk to that Swedish psychiatrist Green recommended. Ha, I've been ducking that guy since I got out of the hospital. I'll do that, but there's something else. I have to find out what the Choates were doing on that property."

"Pit bull, aren't you, Boss?" There was admiration mixed with the melancholy.

"Bruenig said the man moved out of state. He's wrong. Choate's in the neighborhood. Maybe he lives here, maybe he's visiting, hiding under a bridge. Whatever. I saw his tracks at the barn and I think he's been creeping

around the garden. I told you.” *Saw him in the alley, too, didn’t you, Wally?* He shuddered at the recollection of that febrile mouth closing on him.

“Yup, you saw tracks. Almost a year ago,” Delaney said. “If they were even his.”

“Trust me, they were. Pride’s running skips on him, although I’m getting the feeling this fellow isn’t the type who’s easy to find. That’s why I’ve got Pride tracking down whoever sold the Choates the materials for their projects in the back forty. Maybe you can call in a favor with the Marconi boys, or Cortez, see if you can’t turn up some names. I gotta know.”

“Maybe you don’t wanna know.”

“Dee… something’s wrong. People are dying.”

Delaney looked at him in the rearview mirror.

“You better believe it,” Wallace said. “Stop acting like my wet nurse, damn it.”

Delaney stared straight ahead. “Okay,” he said.

“Thank you,” Wallace said, slightly ashamed. He lighted a cigarette as a distraction.

They went to Skip’s home, idled at the gate. Delaney leaned out and pressed on the buzzer until, finally, a butler emerged with apologies from the master of the house. The servant, a rigid, ramrod of a bloke, doubtless imported directly from the finest Hampton school of butlery, requested that they vacate the premises at once. Wallace waited until the butler was inside. He climbed out of the car and hurled a brandy flask Skip gave him some birthday past, watched with sullen pleasure as it punched a hole through a parlor window. Delaney laughed in amazement, shoved Wallace into the car, left rubber smoking on the breeze.

14

Wallace and Delaney were sitting in the study playing cards and eating a dinner of tuna fish sandwiches and Guinness when Lyle Ferguson called to say the barn had been razed. Ferguson hoped Helen would be more at peace. There was an awkward silence and then the men exchanged meaningless pleasantries and hung up.

“It’s done,” Wallace said. He drank the last of his beer and set the dead soldier near its mates.

Delaney dragged on his cigarette and tossed his cards down. He said, “Thing is, no matter how much you cut, cancer always comes back.”

Wallace chose not to acknowledge that. “Next week, I’ll hunt for the rest of those pylons, the ones in the woods, and take a jackhammer to them. I’ll dynamite them if it comes to that.”

“Not big on respecting cultural artifacts, are we?”

“I have a sneaking suspicion that it’s better for us whatever culture they belong to is dead and in the ground.” Wallace missed his little brother. The kid was an ace; he would have known what was what with Bruenig’s story, the crazy altar in the barn, the pylons.

“I saw Janice yesterday. She’s losing her marbles. Randy was supposed to take her and the kids to Yellowstone for spring vacation. She called the cops.”

“I have two postcards from him.” What Wallace didn’t say was that there was something strange about the cards. They were unstamped, for one. And they seemed too old, somehow, their picturesque photographs of Mount Rainier and the Mima Mounds yellowing at the edges, as if they’d lingered on a gift shop rack for decades. Which, in fact, made sense when he checked the photo copyrights and saw the dates 1958 and 1971.

“Sure you do.” Delaney dropped his butt into an empty bottle, pulled another cigarette from behind his ear and lighted it. His eyes were bloodshot. “Hate to admit it… but I was a little stoned that day. When everything happened. Nothing major—I wasn’t impaired, I mean.”

“Hey, it doesn’t matter. I’m not going to bust your chops over something stupid like that.”

“No. It’s important. I wasn’t totally fucked up, but I don’t completely trust my recollections either. Not *completely*.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“I pulled you out of the barn first. Then I ran in for Mrs. S. You’re not supposed to move a person with injuries. Know why I moved her?”

Wallace’s mouth was full of sand. He shook his head.

“Because it took the horse, Mr. S. The horse was already trussed like a fly in a spider web and hanging. I still see its hooves twitching. I didn’t look too close. Figured I wouldn’t have the balls to go under there and grab your wife.” Delaney’s mouth turned down. “That wasp nest of yours… it had a face,” he said, and looked away. “An old man’s face.”

“Dee—”

“Randy was an okay dude. He deserves a pyre. You gonna deal, or what?”

15

Night seeped down. It rained. The power came and went, stuttered in the wires. Wallace picked up on the second ring. The caller ID said, UNKNOWN NAME—UNKNOWN NUMBER.

“Hi, Wally. Your friend is right.” The mouth on the other end was too close to the receiver, was full, sensual and malicious.

Wallace’s face stiffened. “Josh?”

“Cancer always returns because time is a ring. And a ring… well, that’s just a piece of metal around a hole.” A wave of crackling interference drowned the connection.

“Josh!” No answer; only low, angry static.

The display said, THEREISAHOLENOMANCANFILLTHEREISAHOLENOMANCANFILLTHEREISAHOLENOMANCANFILL. Then nothing.

16

Friday morning, Charlie, the dayshift security guard, brought Wallace a densely wrapped parcel from Lance Pride. The shipping address was a small town in Eastern Washington called Drummond and it had been written in a thin, backward-slanting style that Wallace didn’t recognize.

Wallace cut the package open and found a tape cassette and a battered shoebox jammed with musty papers—personal correspondence from the appearance. It bothered him, this delivery from Pride. Why not in person? Why not a phone call, at least? Goosebumps covered his arms.

Wallace retreated to his office. He made a drink and sat at his desk near the window that looked across the manicured lawn, the sleeping garden, and far out into the woods. He finished his drink without tasting it and fixed another and drank that too. Then he filled his glass again, no ice this time, no frills, and put the tape in the machine and pressed the button. The wall above his desk shifted from red to maroon and a chill breeze fluttered drapes. The afternoon light slid toward the edge of the Earth.

After seconds of static and muffled curses, Pride cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Wallace, hi. This is Wednesday evening and… where am I. Uh, I'm at the Lone Tree Motel outside of Drummond on Highway 32 and I recently finished interviewing Tyler Choate. It's about two in the a.m. and I haven't slept since I dunno, so cut me slack if this starts to drag. The guards had confiscated my tape recorder at the door, but Tyler gave me a note pad so I could write it down for later. He wanted to be certain you got your money's worth… I'll try to hit the highlights as best I can. Bear with me…

"Okay, I went looking for the manufacturer that might've sold the Choates aluminum tubes, pipes or what have you. I called some people, did some digging and came up with a name—Elijah Salter. Salter was a marine, vet of the Korean War; rode with the cavalry as a gunner and engineering specialist—survived Operation Mousetrap and had the Bronze Star and Ike's signature to prove it. This leatherneck Bronze Star-winner came home after the war, started a nice family and went back to school where he discovered he was a real whizz-bang mechanical engineer. He graduated and signed on with a metal fabrication plant over in Poulsbo. Calaban Industries. This plant makes all kinds of interesting stuff, mostly for aerospace companies and a certain east coast college that was rigging a twenty-mile-long atom-smasher—more on that later.

"Well, old Sergeant Salter climbed the ladder to plant manager, got the keys to the executive washroom, the Club Med package, free dental. They gave him plenty of slack and he jumped at it, opened a sideline with his own, special clientele—among these, the Choates. Struck me as a tad eerie, this overseer of a high-tech company keeping a group of hicks in his black book and I decided to run it to ground. Wasn't tough to track Salter, he'd retired in '84, renovated a villa near here. I kid you not, a dyed-in-the-wool

Spanish villa like where Imperial-era nobility cooled their heels. I couldn't believe my ex-jarhead could afford a spread that posh—guy had palm trees, marble fountains, you name it. You woulda been jealous. Tell you what: his sidelines musta been lucrative.

"Made it big, made it real big, and after Salter got over the shock of meeting me in his den with my revolver pointed at his gut, he offered me a scotch and soda and praised Kaleb Choate to the heavens. Claimed not to know any of the rest of the clan that was still alive. Oh, he knew *of* them, he'd corresponded with Paul Choate occasionally, but they hadn't ever met in person or anything like that. I didn't get it—Kaleb's been in the ground since 1947, but what the hell.

"The sergeant had gone soft, the way a lion in a cage goes soft—he still had that bloody gleam in his eye when he gestured at the house and said his patrons took care of their own.

"Patrons? The way it slithered out of his mouth, way he sneered when he said it, didn't make me too comfortable. Also, when he's bragging about all the wonderful things these patrons did for him, I noticed a painting hanging over the piano. Damned thing was so dark it was almost black and that's why it took me a while to make out it wasn't actually a portrait, it was a picture of a demon. Or something. Guy in a suit like muckety-mucks wore in the Roaring Twenties, but his head was sort of, well, deformed, I guess is the best way to put it. Like I said, though, the oil was so dark I couldn't quite figure what I was seeing—just that it reminded me of a beehive sittin' on a man's neck. That, and the hands were about as long as my forearm. Reminded me of spooky stories my granny used to tell about Australia during the Depression. The aborigines have this legend about desert spirits called the Mimis. The Mimis are so thin they turn sideways and slip through a crack in the wall. They grab snotty kids, drag 'em underground. Don't know why I thought of that—maybe the long, snaky hands rang a bell. Granny used to scare the holy shit outta us kids with her campfire tales.

"Now I'm studying Salter's décor a bit more closely and, yep, he's got funky Gothic crap going on everywhere. Salter goes, sure, ya, ya betcha, we laid some aluminum cables on the Choate property; set up a few other gadgets too—but these projects were simply improvements on systems that had been in place for decades. I asked him what the idea was behind these

cables, and he titters something about flytraps and keyholes. Kaleb Choate had been investigating alternate forms of energy and that's why he buried pipes and wires everywhere; he was building a superconductor, although his version was different, a breakthrough because it operated at high temperature. He used it to develop a whole bunch of toys. Salter used the word *squid* to describe them, except I don't think that's quite right either. Here it is—superconducting quantum interference device. SQUID, that's cute, huh. Oh, yeah… about the weird rocks you saw. Those pylons scattered around the area have been there for thousands of years. Some ancient tribe set 'em up to achieve a prehistoric version of Kaleb's machine, kinda like the Pyramids were before their time. Those rocks are highly radioactive—but Salter said the radiation is of unknown origin, something today's science boys haven't classified, even.

"Said if I want to know the *dirty details* I should speak with the Choate brothers. I didn't appreciate that answer much, so I bopped him around. He starts babbling at me in a foreign language—dunno *what* language, probably Korean, but it made my skin prickle—this old savage on his belly by the pool, grinning and yammering and leaking from his nose. Then Salter just stops all of a sudden and stares at me and he's obviously disgusted. I got a gun on him, I ain't afraid to hurt him a little or a lot, and here he is shaking his head as if I'm some brat whose shat his diaper at a dinner party. He says he hopes I live so long as to bear witness and join the great revelry. Says my skin will fly from a flagpole. And all the pistol-whipping in the world wouldn't encourage him to say anything else. Not in English, anyhow. I ransacked his house, found a shoebox of letters and postcards from P., M., and T. Choate to Salter dated 1967 through 2002 and there were some drawings of things the Choates were building; blueprints… Oh, and I swiped a rolodex chock full of interesting names. Creepy bastard had the Lieutenant Governor's home number, I kid you not. Guy's handwriting was goddamned sloppy, but I spotted one for Tyler Choate, the ex-sheriff's deputy. I decided Salter was right—best to have a chat with Tyler, get it straight from the source.

"Choate was my only choice. According to the records, Tyler and Joshua were the last of the breed, discounting obscure family branches, illegitimate

kids, and so on. Since I'd been striking out with Josh, and Tyler's doing twenty to life in the state pen, I went the easy route.

"Tyler's not at Walla Walla anymore; there'd been some razzle-dazzle with the paperwork and he got transferred north to a max security facility. Place called Station 3, between Lind and Marengo on the Rattlesnake Flat.

"Choate surprised me. Friendly. Real damned friendly. Strange accent; spoke very distinctly, as if he were a 'right proper' gentleman not a con nabbed for assorted nastiness. In fact, I got the impression he was eager for my visit. Lonely. Didn't care what I was after, either. I gave him a cockamamie story, naturally, but I needn't have bothered. Sonofabitch was rubbing his hands together over the phone.

"It was a date. Long drive and I hate going east. Once you climb over the mountains it's nothing but wheat fields, desert and blowing dust. This Station 3 was on the outskirts of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. It sat at the end of a dirt road in the middle of a prairie. The earth is black in those parts; salt deposits. Humongous black rocks and pine trees scattered around. Coyotes, jackrabbits and rattlesnakes.

"I went by an Indian reservation; heard there's a pretty nice casino, but I didn't check. The Station itself was depressing—a bunch of crappy concrete houses inside a storm fence with rusty rolls of barbwire on top. Some buses were parked near the loading docks, the kind that are painted gray and black with mesh on the windows, said FRANKLIN COUNTY CORRECTIONS in big letters. A reject military base is how it looked.

"Way, way out in a field men were hoeing rows in biblical tradition; seems the prison industry, such as it is, revolves around selling potatoes and carrots to the local tribe. A dozen cons in jumpsuits milled in the yard, pulling weeds, busting asphalt to make way for the new parking lot. Don't know why they needed one—the screws and admin parked in a garage and there were maybe three cars in front, counting mine.

"After handing my I.D. to the guards in the gatehouse, they buzzed me through to a short, uncovered promenade. Heavy gauge chain link made a funnel toward the main complex and as I walked I noticed there's graffiti on the concrete walls. Some of it'd been whitewashed, but only some. I saw SHAITAN IS THE MASTER and PRAISE BELIAL. BOW TO

CHEMOSH O MAGGOTS. THE OLD ONE IS COMING. Frankly, it gave me the willies. Told myself they hadn't gotten around to scrubbing those sections. They'd missed a spot or two. Uh-huh.

"I was beginning to regret my impulsive nature. Not as if I'm green, or anything; I'd been locked inside the kit kat for a minor beef. More than the graffiti was playing on my nerves, though. The guards seemed off-key. The whole bunch of them were sluggish as hornets drunk on hard cider. Swear to God one was jacking off up in the tower; his rifle kinda bounced on its shoulder strap.

"Warden Loveless, he's this pencil-dick bean counter with thick glasses; he didn't blink while we were jawing. Sounded like one of my undergrad English lit profs, droned through his nose. Don't recall his little list of rules and regs, but I can't forget him drooling on his collar. He kept dabbing it with a fancy handkerchief. I tried not to stare, but damn.

"The warden says he's glad I made it, he thought I had changed my mind, and he sounded relieved, joked about sending some of the boys to bring me in if I hadn't come. Warden Loveless says Tyler Choate is expecting me, that we should go visit him right away, and let me tell you the only reason I didn't turn on my heel and walk out was there were several men holding carbines at half-mast and staring at me with zombie eyes, and I think some of them were drooling too. See, I coulda sworn Loveless said *Master* instead of Tyler. Acoustics were pretty screwed up in there, though.

"Loveless takes me on a walking tour of the prison. Place probably hadn't been remodeled since the '40s or '50s, exposed pipe and those grilled-in bulbs. Damp and foul as a latrine, mildew creeping in every joint. Damned dark; seemed like most of the lights had been busted and never replaced. Another odd detail—three-quarters of the cells were empty. We've got the planet's most crowded prison system and this place is deserted.

"We rode an elevator to the sublevels, a steel cage like coal miners crowd into. Down, way down. The cage rattled and groaned and I never realized before that I'm claustrophobic. Okay, something funny happened to me. The walls closed in and my collar got tight. I… started seeing things. No sound, only images, clear as day, like my mind was the Bijou running a matinee horror flick.

“That goddamned barn of yours. My mom and pop squirming in a lake of worms. Helen grinning at me. Jellyfish. I hate those things. Got stung once in Virginia when I spent the summer with my cousin. I nearly drowned. Goddamned things. I saw other stuff, stuff I don’t want to remember. So damn real I got vertigo, thought the floor was gonna drop from under me.

“Maybe I’m not claustrophobic, maybe it was something else. Fumes. Stress. My daddy had shellshock when he came home from the war. Flipped his wig every so often, beat the hell outta his fellow drunks at the tavern. When he was like that, he’d sit in his rocker till the a.m., cleaning his Winchester and staring at nothing, face of a china plate. Said he saw the gooks coming, too many, not enough bullets, stabbed so many his bayonet got dull as a butter knife. My old man drank wood grain alcohol through a funnel; smelled like a refinery before he died.

“Riding down in that elevator, I bet my face looked like his when he was fighting ghosts. I played it cool, gritted my teeth and thought about the Red Sox batting order, getting laid by the chick who used to come by the Mud Shack every Thursday with her sister, whatever happy shit I could dream up on short notice. The vertigo and the visions went away when we hit bottom. A broken circuit. After a few steps it was easy to think the whole episode was a brain fart, my bout with the pink elephants. Yeah, I had DT’s. Been trying to kick the sauce and you know how that is… My hands were doing the Parkinson’s polka.

“Loveless called this level the Isolation Ward; told me to follow the lights to H Block; said he’d wait for me. No rush. Choate didn’t entertain every day.

“More graffiti. More by a thousandfold. Numbers, symbols, gibberish. It covered the tunnel walls, ceiling, the cell bars. Probably inside the cells too, but those things were black as a well-digger’s asshole. Kicker is, I saw one of the fellas responsible for the artwork—this scrawny man in filthy dungarees was doing the honors. Must’ve been eighty years old; his ribs stuck out and his eyes were milky. Blind as hell. He carted a couple buckets of black and white paint and was slapping brushloads onto the concrete. After he’d made a nice mess, he’d get a different brush to start turning the shapeless gobs into letters and such. Precise as a surgeon, too. Kind of fascinating except for the parts I could read were little gems like: WORMS

OF THE MAW WILL FEED ON THY LIVER and INFIDELS WILL CHOKE ON THE MASTER'S SHIT.

"There was a guard station and a gate. While the gate was grinding open I heard music up ahead, distorted by the echoes of clanging metal and my heart. Thought I was gonna have a coronary right there. A bloody glow oozed from the mouth of a cell. It was the only light after the wimpy fluorescent strip in the guard shack.

"Tyler Choate had himself a cozy pad there in the bowels of Station 3. They'd even removed the door; it was lying farther down the hall, as if somebody had chucked it aside for the recycling man. Chinese paper lamps were everywhere, floating in the dark; that's what gave off the red glow. The bunks had been ripped out, replaced by a hammock and some chairs. Bamboo. Oriental rugs, a humongous vase with a dead fern. Big wooden cabinets loaded with knick-knacks, bric-a-bracs and liquor. Sweet Jesus, the old boy loves his liquor. Found out later most of the doodads were from China, the Polynesian Islands, a bunch of places I can't pronounce. Who would've guessed this hick deputy for a traveling man, right?

"Music was coming from an antique record player—the type with a horn and a hand crank. A French diva sang the blues and Tyler Choate soaked her up in a big reed chair, feet propped, eyes closed. Real long hair; oily black in a pony tail looped around his neck. He looked like a Satanic Buddha—skinny on the ends and bloated in the middle.

"I noticed the shoe collection. Dozens and dozens of shoes and boots, lined up neat as you please along the wall and into the shadows of the adjoining cell where the red light didn't quite reach. None of them were the right size for Choate—his slippers were enormous; the size of snowshoes, easy. Tailor-made for sure.

"Then he says to me, *Welcome to the Mandarin Suite, Mr. Pride. Take off your shoes.* His voice was lispy, like the queers that hang around beauty parlors. But not like that either. This was different. He sounded… amused. Smug.

"The elevator ride had rattled me, sure, sure, but not enough to account for the dread that fell on me as I stood in that dungeon and gawped at him. I felt woozy again, same as the elevator, worse than the elevator. Swear, he

coulda been beaming these terrible thoughts into my head. I kept seeing Randy Freeman's face, all splattered and buried in mud. Why would I see such a thing, Wally? Doesn't make sense.

"When Choate stood to shake my hand, I nearly crapped my pants. I knew from the files the Choate brothers were tall, but I swear he wasn't much shy of eight feet, and axe-handle broad. He wore a white silk shirt with stains around the pits. He smelled rank. Rank as sewage, a pail of fish guts gone to the maggots. A fly landed on his wrist, crawled into his sleeve. Bruenig wasn't jiving about those kids being filthy.

"My hand disappeared into Choate's and I decided that I'd really and truly screwed up. Like sticking my hand into a crack in the earth and watching it shut. Except, he didn't pulp my bones, didn't yank me in close for a hillbilly waltz, nothing like that. He said he was happy to meet a real live P.I., made me sit in the best chair and poured Johnny Walker Black in greasy shot glasses, drank to my health. All very cordial and civilized. He asked if I had met his brother, and I said no, but Josh was hanging around your house and it really had to stop. He agreed that Josh was on the rude side—he'd always been a touch wild. Choate asked what you thought about the barn, if you'd figured it out yet. I said no and he laughed, said since you hadn't blown your brains out, you must not know the whole truth, which, to me, sounded like some more hocus pocus crap was in the offing. I wasn't wrong on that count. Did I know anything about String Theory? He thought I looked like a guy who might dabble in particle physics between trailing unfaithful husbands and busting people's heads. I told him I'm more of a Yeats man and he said poetry was an inferior expression of the True Art. What about molecular biology; surely I craved to understand how we apes rose from primordial slime. No? Supersymmetry? Hell no, says I, and he chuckled and filled my glass. Guess the Bruenig spiel was right about a few things. The Choate men were scientists, always have been interested in the stars and nature, time travel and all sorts of esoteric shit. Mostly they studied how animals and insects live, how, lemmesee… how *biological organisms adapt and evolve in deep quantum time. The very nature of space time itself*. Choate said the family patriarchs had been prying into that particular branch of scientific research since before the Dark Ages.

“What was Kaleb’s interest? Tyler said, *Hypermutation and punctuated equilibrium*. Started in on those SQUIDs Salter told me about. Kaleb wanted to accelerate his own genetic evolution. He grafted these homemade SQUIDs onto his brain and that jumpstarted the process. I can just imagine the operation. *Brrr.* He survived without lobotomizing himself and it was a roaring success. The implant heightened his mental acuity by an incredible degree, which led to more inventions—*Devices Tesla never dreamt of—never dared!* Jesus Louise… shoulda seen Tyler Choate’s face when he said that. He leered at me like he intended to make me his *numero uno* bitch.

“What kind of devices, you may be asking. See, Grandpa figured there was a way to configure electromagnetic pulses to create a black hole, or a kind of controlled tear in subatomic matter, and I heard some think-tank guys in Boston tried the very same thing a few years ago, so between you and me, maybe the geezer wasn’t totally bonkers, but anyhow. Kaleb wanted to use this black hole, or what ever the hell it’s supposed to be, to access a special radioactive energy. They’d detected traces of it in the pylons, like Salter said, and Tyler confirmed the radiation doesn’t exist anywhere in the known spectrum.

“I’m blitzed and feeling a bit kamikaze, so I ask, where’s it come from, then? *Out there*, is how Tyler put it. *Out there in the great Dark.* So picture this: this friggin’ psycho hillbilly leaning over me with his face painted like blood in the lamplight, sneering about *ineffable mysteries* and flexing his monster hands as if he’s practicing to choke a camel. He grins and says Grandpa Kaleb bored a hole in space and crawled through. Tyler started spouting truly wild-ass stuff. Some bizarre mumbo-jumbo about a vast rift, the cosmic version of the Marianas Trench. He said very old and truly awful things are drifting in the dark and it’s damned lucky for us apes that these huge, blind things haven’t taken any notice of planet Earth.

“Tyler said Kaleb became *The door and the bridge. The mouth of the pit*. And if that wasn’t enough, Tyler and Josh are hanging around because the rest of Kaleb’s heirs have been taken to His bosom, rejoined the fold. Tyler and Josh had been left with us chickens to, I dunno, guard the henhouse or something. To make things ready. Ready for what? *For the Old Man, of course. For His return*. I didn’t press him on that.

Another thing… The bonus effect of Kaleb's gizmo's electromagnetic pulse is it's real nifty for shutting off car engines and stranding people near the ol' farm… I asked why they wanted to strand people near their property and he just looked at me. Scary, man. He said, *Why? Because it gives Him tremendous pleasure to meet new and interesting people. Grandfather always liked people. Now He loves them. Sadly, folks don't drop by too often. We keep Him company as best we can. We're good boys like that.*

"By this point I was pretty much past wasted and I know he went on and on, but most of it flew over my head. One thing that stuck with me as I got ready to stagger outta there, is he clamped one giant paw on my shoulder and said with that creepy smile of his, '*Out there' is a relative term, it's closer than you might think. Oh my, the great Dark is only as far away as your closet when you kill the light… as your reflection when it thinks you aren't looking. Bye, bye and see you soon*.

"I beat it topside. Barefoot. Bastard kept my shoes…" Pride's narrative faltered and was replaced by a thumping noise in the background. A chair squeaked. He spoke from a distance, perhaps the motel room door. "Yeah? Oh, hey—" His voice degenerated into jags of a garbled conversation followed by a long, blank gap; then a wheeze like water gurgling in a hose. Another gap. Someone coughed and chuckled. Then silence.

17

Wallace gazed at the rolling wheels as dead air hissed through the speaker. He emptied the dingy shoebox on his desk, pushed the yellow papers like a man shuffling dominos or tarot cards. He poured another drink from the dwindling bottle, squinted at the cramped script done in bleeding ink, whole paragraphs deformed by water stains and stains of other kinds and the depredations of silverfish. There were schematics, as Delaney had promised —arcane, incomprehensible figures with foreign notations.

The house was dark but for the lamp on Wallace's desk. The walls shuddered from a blast of wind. Rain smacked hard against the windows. Floorboards creaked heavily and Wallace strained to detect the other fleeing sound—a rustling, a whisper, an inhalation like a soft, weak moan. He

wiped his face and listened, but there was nothing except whistling pipes. He poured another drink and now the bottle was dry.

He sifted through the letters, sprinkling them with vodka because his hands were trembling. He studied one dated February 1971. It was somewhat legible:

> Eli,
>
> The expedition has gone remarkably well, thanks to your timely assistance. It is indeed as Grandfather says, “Per aspera ad astra that we seek communion and grace from our patrons of antiquity.” I shall keep you apprised of developments. Yours, P. Choate.

Another, from June 1971:

> *Grandfather has sent word from the gulf, Ab ovo, as it were. It is as they promised… and more. His words to me: “Non sum qualis eram.” It is the truth. He is the door and the bridge and we are grateful. On the day all doors are thrown open, you shall be remembered and honored for your service to the Grand Estate. Thank you, dear friend. Yours, P. Choate.*

He counted roughly three dozen others, including some photographs, mostly ruined. He paused at a warped and faded postcard picturing a ramshackle barn in a field. It was unclear whether this was an etching or an actual photograph—the perspective featured the southeast face of the barn and the road in the distance. He could barely make out the Bentley on the shoulder, a man working under the raised hood. The back of the card was unstamped and grimy with fingerprints. It had been addressed to Mr. Wallace Smith of 1313 Vineland Drive. October 6, 1926:

> *Hello, Wallace.*
>
> *Helen wishes you were here.*
>
> *Regards, K. Choate.*

Wallace’s belly sank into itself. What could it possibly mean?

Grandfather always liked people. Now He loves them.

The house shook again and Wallace dropped the card. He was nauseated. “*Mr. Smith?”* The intercom squawked and he almost pissed himself. “*—to*

say good night?” Kate was nearly unintelligible over the intercom.

“What!” He nearly shattered the plastic from the force of his blow. He took a breath, said in a more reasonable tone, “I’ll be there in a minute.”

The desk lamp flickered. *I am here to usher in the dark*. Wallace dialed Pride’s cell number and received no answer. He pushed away from the desk, stood, and shuffled in a dream to the hallway. A draft ran cold around his ankles and when he thumbed the switch, the lights hesitated in their sockets, grudgingly ignited and shone dim and milky. Shadows spread across the floor and climbed the walls.

Wallace plodded forward and ended up at Helen’s door. Helen’s door was made of thick oak and decorated with filigreed panels. He stood before the oak door and breathed through his mouth, blowing like a dray horse.

Cancer always returns.

Wallace turned the knob and pushed into Helen’s apartment. He slapped the switch and nothing happened. The dimensions were all wrong; the room had become an undersea cavern where a whale had bloated on its gasses and putrefied. Objects assumed phantom shapes in the sleepy murk: the therapy table and its glinting buckles; a pinewood armoire; a scattering of chairs; the unmade bed, a wedge of ivory sheets and iron lattice near the opaque window.

Wallace detected a hushed, sticky sound. The muffled squelch of a piglet snuffling its mother’s teat, smacking and slobbering with primal greed. As he turned toward the disturbance, something damp and slender tickled the back of his neck. Then his scalp, his left ear, his cheek. Something like moist jelly strands entangled him. These tendrils floated everywhere, a veritable hanging garden of angel’s hair gently undulating in the crosshatched light from the hallway. Wallace cried out and batted the strands like a man flailing at cobwebs.

He gaped up into the blue-black shadows and did not comprehend the puzzle of dangling feet, one in a shoe, the other encased in hosiery; or the legs, also wrapped in nylon hose that terminated at the hem of a skirt. Wallace did not recognize the mannequin extremities, jittering feebly with each impulse of a live current. The left shoe, a square, wooden thing with a blunt nose, plopped onto the hardwood as the legs quivered and slid

upward, vanishing to mid-thigh attended by the sound of a squishing sponge.

Wallace was confused; his mind twittered with half-formed memories, fragmented pictures. All circuits busy, please try again. He thought, *Kate's shoe. Kate's shoe is on the floor. Kate's legs. Where's the rest of her. Where oh where oh fuck me*. He beheld it then, an elephantine mass lodged in the ceiling, an obscene scribble of shivering tapioca and multi-jointed limbs. A gory fissure traversed its axis and disgorged the myriad glutinous threads. The behemoth wore a wicked old man's face with a clotted Vandyke, a hooked nose and wet, staring eyes that shone like cinders of dead stars. The old man patiently sucked Kate the Nurse into his mouth. Ropes of viscid yolk dripped from the corners of the old man's lips and pattered on the floor. Wallace thought with hysterical glee, *Gulper eel, gulper eel!* which was an eel that lived in the greatest depths and could quite handily unhinge its skull to swallow large prey.

Wallace reeled.

The bloody fissure throbbed and seeped; and tracking the convulsion, he discovered the abomination's second head. He glimpsed Helen's pallid torso, her drooping breasts and slack face—an alto-relievo sculpted from wax at the apex of the monstrous coagulation of her body. The crack nearly divided her face and skull and it fractured the ceiling with a jagged chasm that traveled far beyond the scope of any light.

Helen opened her eyes and smiled at Wallace. Her smile was sweet and infinitely mindless. Her mouth formed a perfect black circle that began to dilate fantastically and she craned her overlong neck as if to kiss him.

Wallace screamed and stumbled away. He was a man slogging in mud. The vermiculate tendrils boiled around him, coiled in his hair, draped his shoulders and slithered down the collar of his shirt.

He was still screaming when he staggered into the hall and yanked the door shut. He crabbed two steps sideways and tottered. His legs gave way and the floor and walls rolled and then he was prone with his right arm flung out before him in a ghastly imitation of a breast stroke.

A wave of lassitude suffused him, as if the doctor had given him a yeoman's dose of morphine, and in its wake, pins and needles, and

hollowness. Countless tendrils had oozed through the doorjamb, the spaces between the hinges, the keyhole, and burrowed into him so snugly he was vaguely aware of their insistent twitches and tugs. Dozens were buried in the back of his hand and arm, reshaping the veins and arteries; more filaments nested in his back, neck and skull, everywhere. As he watched, unable to blink, their translucence flushed a rich crimson that flowed back toward their source, drawn inexorably by an imponderable suction.

He went under.

18

Wallace regained consciousness.

The veins in his hand had collapsed and the flesh was pale and sunken like the cracked hand of a mummy. Near his cheek rested a sandal that surely belonged to a giant. The sandal was caked in filth and blood.

"Are you sleeping, brother Wallace?" Josh said. "I want to show you something beautiful." He opened the door. Wallace's eyes rolled up as he was steadily drawn across the threshold and into darkness.

Oh, sweetheart, Helen said eagerly.

19

Delaney came in that morning and boiled himself a cup of instant coffee and poured a bowl of cereal and had finished both before he realized something was wrong. The house lay vast and quiet except for small sounds. Where was the hubbub of daily routine? Helen had usually begun shrieking by now, and Cecil inevitably put on one of the old classical heavies like Mozart or Beethoven in hopes of calming her down. Not today —today nothing stirred except the periodic rush of air through the ducts.

Delaney lighted a cigarette and smoked and tried to convince himself he was jumpy over nothing. He went upstairs and found Wallace's bedroom empty. Near Helen's suite, he came across a muddy track. The shoe print was freakishly large. Delaney pulled a switchblade from his pocket and snicked it open. He put his hand on the door knob and now his nerves were jangling full alarm like they sometimes had back in the bad old days of

gang battles and liquor store hold-ups and dodging Johnny Law. The air was supercharged. And the doorknob was sticky. He stepped back and regarded, stoic as a wolf in the face of the unknown, his red fingers. A fly hummed and circled his head.

He bounced the switchblade in his palm and decided, to hell with it, he was going in, and then a woman giggled and whispered something and part of the something contained *Delaney*. He knew that voice. It had been months since he heard it last. “Screw this noise,” he said very matter of fact. He turned and loped for the stairs.

Delaney calmed by degrees once he was outside, and walked swiftly across the waterlogged grounds to his cottage where he threw a few essentials into his ancient sea bag—the very one his daddy brought home from the service—checked his automatic and stuffed it under his shirt. He started his Cadillac and rolled to the gate. His breathing had slowed, he had combed his hair and gotten a grip and was almost normal on the surface. At least his hands had stopped shaking. He forced a cool, detached smile. The smile that said, *Hello, officer. Why, yes, everything is fine*.

Charlie the guard was a pimply twenty-something with disheveled hair and an ill-fitting uniform. He was obviously hung-over and scarcely glanced up at Delaney as he buzzed the gate. “See ya, Mr. Dee.”

“Hey, any trouble lately? Ya know—anything on the cameras?”

Charlie shrugged. “Nah. Well, uh, the feed’s been kinda wonky off ’n’ on. “

“Wonky?”

“Nothin’ to worry ’bout, Mr. Dee. We ain’t seen any prowlers.”

“What about the night fella?”

“Uh, Tom. He woulda said somethin’ if there was a problem. Why?”

“No reason. I figured as much. You take care, partner.” Delaney pushed his sunglasses into place and gave the guard a little two-finger salute. He cast a quick, final glance at the house in his rearview mirror, but the view was spoiled by a crack in the glass. Had that been there before? He tacked it on his list of things-to-do once he got wherever he was going. Where was he going? Far away, that was certain.

Delaney gunned the engine and cruised down the driveway. He vanished around the bend as Charlie set aside his copy of *Sports Illustrated* to answer the phone. “Uh, yeah. Oh, mornin’, Mr. Smith. Uh… Okay, sure. Right now? Yessir!” Charlie hung up with a worried expression. It was only his second week on the job. He walked briskly to the big house, opened the door and hurried inside.

The Royal Zoo Is Closed

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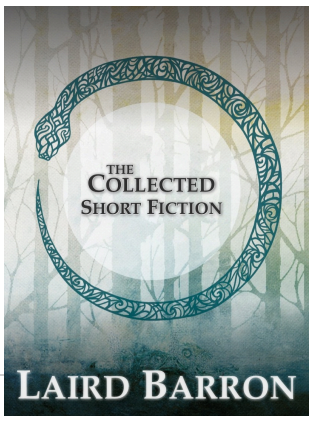


—ENTR'ACTE—

Sweeney smeared a bloody thumbprint on the refrigerator. He stared at it, studied it, at length. Stared as if he'd discovered a roadmap of a foreign country, stared like it was going to show him the quickest means to apprehend some territory he hadn't thought of—not aloud, not yet.

He stared at that thumbprint, his thumbprint, but already alien, already drying from red to black. He thought, *Why did I think of a map, it's a completely different shape—a cockroach, a butterfly, two butterflies fucking. And fuck me, it's changing.*

Actually, several hundred-thousand thoughts were crashing in the supercollider of his cerebrum; asteroids caroming off a cortex loaded to the steerage with memories of pancakes, prison, premature ejaculations and continental drift. How in the Beginning the whole wobbly volcanic mass had two heads, Laurasia and Gondwanaland, and J. W. Booth was captured in a barn, and how Underdog and Popeye couldn't fight their way out of a paper bag until they'd had their fix. However, it was the Rorschach-eats-Escher quality of his own fleshly warps and whorls in bas-relief that set his synapses ablaze, shot alarm pings across the radar screen.

Sweeney stepped away too fast, the instinct of a man caught out by a truck speeding through the crosswalk, the convulsive jerk that gives a pious soul pause to genuflect, elicits lips to a crucifix, or a rosary, the antenna-twitch of a bug in the descending shadow of some colossal hand. An orchestra tuned off-key instruments in the pit of Sweeney's belly.

Just a bloody thumbprint on a white background. Just that. Only the fridge humming and the window rattling from the traffic on the street. He checked

the clock, watched it tick into a new hour. He gathered his papers from the kitchen table, stuffed them into his briefcase with the mindless preoccupation of an animal scavenging for winter. Now his heart was quiet in its cage and he was feeling better and also a little stupid. The last time this happened he spent three hours gaping at the filament of the bathroom light, paralyzed with an unshakable conviction that it suddenly represented the last dying spark in a universe of frozen ash.

He walked out of the apartment and was waiting at the bus stop for the 76 when it occurred to him to wonder how he cut his hand. He flexed his fingers searching for a wound that wasn't there and considered if the department head would buy stigmata.

Sweeny's portfolio was spattered in blood and probably ruined, but it didn't matter—the machines and the cockroaches would doubtless inherit everything precisely as Hawking always promised. And anyway, this was his last day at work.

Riding from the University District to downtown in the morning meant crowds. Crowds meant nothing to Sweeney. He was a veteran of the city, the first one off the platform and perched on a seat above the wheel-well, briefcase across his knees. He looked out the window at the skyline, chromatic superstructures strung by blinking lights. Dusty haze coiled within the sunrise. The Needle slid past on the starboard side. Quite apropos, since this city was the West Coast plexus of the Heroin Nebula. Sweeney hadn't bought a ticket to the revolving crown of the famous tower, not in thirty years—and wouldn't ever. Every morning he half-expected to watch it flare like a firecracker and rocket into space.

Stop and go in the freeway crush lasted twenty minutes. It always seemed like an hour packed tight as olives on the stinking bus with the blue-haired new-wave lawyers, twitching nosebleeds of all sexes on the double to their doctors, and the transients in Technicolor rags, polyester business suits and garbage bags, smelling of ammonia and microwaved meat.

One guy, a fat guy in a coat and tie with an Adam's apple that truly resembled an apple, a Washington Golden Delicious, muttered a monologue about passenger pigeons. Nobody could shrink away from him, nor escape his encyclopedic recitation; there was no space to squeeze. Sweeney might

as well have been trapped aboard a mail train stalled on the outskirts of The Third World, waiting for a smashup to wipe the excess of human cargo from the tracks, except here there were no chickens, no soldiers with fingers inside trigger guards, and the heat wasn't hammer and tongs yet. It was still coming.

A fire engine revved its klaxon, bullied past them, crawling upstream through columns of stalled metal, and Sweeney considered how in the dimness of his childhood he had wanted to be a fireman, to wear the helm with the symbol, the black and yellow turnout coat, to wield the ax.

Sweeney wouldn't take the job if they paid him triple. He wouldn't be a cop either. Or a teacher. Christ, he wouldn't set foot inside a high school, they were shooting galleries these days.

The bus disgorged in the tunnel. Worker ants poured from the barrel, flowed up the escalators into the street. Sweeney led the surge, chin in his chest, striding past the Korean espresso stand, the all-star a cappella rappers, and the heavies with their hats out. A radio sputtered static. Jimmy Swaggart shrieking on full automatic, accompanied by a horn section, the hiss-boom-bah of the hometown coliseum, a cymbal clash. Jesus wasn't dead, just in hiding like Cousin Waldo. Maybe they were shacking with Noriega at a Vatican safehouse.

Fresh graffiti slashed across green mailboxes, a dog bristled at Sweeney's approach, practically slavered to take a piece of his ankle, but didn't. A bum wearing a Seahawks parka and a monogrammed sock cap he'd likely ripped off called the dog back, gave it a pat with a hand most of the skin had curled from, like scales on the dirt-blacked talon of some large, flightless bird. Sweeney hurried on. He was going places.

He was thinking and obsessing about the graffiti on the mailboxes, the brick walls of the buildings, and everywhere it splattered and proliferated; a specialized urban life form, human kudzu bred in the caverns of a hive mind that chanted slogans like FREE WILL, and INDEPENDENCE, and REVOLLUTION. And spelled it incorrectly, mostly.

What was encrypted in the glyphs of the modern age, what did it mean? Certainly a cipher, as was the ancient Cockney, invented as the argot of the disenfranchised, the disaffected, the cant of thieves who crept into darkened

homes and ate the peanut butter and drank the beer and put their greasy mitts on your daughter, if you had one, and pretty soon she'd be following them around, learning how to do loop-de-loops on a skateboard, a bullring in her nose, or wherever, a satellite in a decaying orbit. She might wander off to Hollywood, do a tour in the trenches, wind up on the casting coach hoping to become the next Norma Jean bursting from a cake to serenade the knights of Camelot, another domesticated seal; thoroughly modern though, because her tattoos said as much. A cipher by any other name and *I'm sorry Mr. & Mrs. So & So, we found her in a ditch.* That's where the smart money was in the whole degenerate crap shoot.

Sweeney, consumed with graffiti, recollected graffiti artists he had known. Jacks of the trade, as it were. The best of them always went armed with a pithy salvo, inscrutable as a ghetto to the sleek banker rolling in an SUV.

When you're outta crack, the crack of dawn will do, so said a former would-be sumo named Confucius, Confucius Alexander Trey, or Cat for short. A college buddy, a drinking buddy, the one who went the wrong way down the track, although these days Sweeney wasn't so certain of that estimation. Cat was a sure-enough Michelangelo with a spray can or a magic marker and his canvases of preference were the temples of wealth and avarice—as defined by the book of C. He didn't make it far, geologically speaking. He died in '99, shotgunned in the face outside a shelter in Pioneer Square. Closed coffin, open circuit, and there's no apothegm to counter that, so shovel on the dirt. Karma, brothers and sisters, has a mouth as big as the world.

Sweeney glimpsed Confucius smirking, here and there, not every time, but with sufficient regularity to warrant suspicion, and it was another thing to worry about. Confucius knew something, obviously. Maybe it was true—the handwriting was on the wall.

Things were getting too complicated. In the eighteenth century when the Cockney slang was in flower, blokes trundling along Buck's Row weren't worried about Big Bangs or ICBMs pointed at their bedrooms, or String Theories tweaking the chords of high-strung theological violins. They didn't give a fig about Stephen Hawking, or nanotech out-sprinting human evolution to the brass ring, or wristwatches. The world wasn't on its last legs in 1788, wasn't sucking in its last breath, wasn't ready to topple from

the roof of heaven into an abyss, even if a few critics thought it might, or that it should. The prophecies were shouted lowercase.

Today of all days, the graffiti held a message for Sweeney that had lurked there from the beginning, astride the mortar and the calculus.

Sweeney read HELL between the isosceles, ellipses and hoops. He read EAT OR BE EATEN and THE END IS HERE. He read SWEENEY CALL HOME. And he read no further. He went on his way, wearing the stunned expression of a man who has forgotten something important. A man fumbling in his pocket for keys to a car he doesn't own, a house he's never lived in.

Sweeney gazed into the branches of the plum trees planted at intervals along the sidewalk. The trees were pleasant; it was much safer than touring the country where animals rustled among the woodwork. These trees were innocent of inhabitants—the rats only lived in them at night. Sometimes earnest dollars amounted to more than a hill of beans in a world of spoons. Sometimes someone had taste. Sometimes someone showed restraint—plum trees, glitzy fountains and the billion acres of grass you're not supposed to walk on under penalty of death. Propriety, decency, common sense were tragically underrepresented, as was exhibited by the Hammering Man looming near the SAM, the pregnant nude bronzed between a library and a Lutheran daycare, or Lenin glowering in Fremont, the self-styled Left Bank, the so-called Center of the Universe. Fremont could have him if they wanted. Stalin too—why not? Grab a shovel; shit isn't always free, just cheap. Sweeney thought they were trying a bit too hard.

Sweeney was, as ever, early. He ducked into a diner, seized the lone deserted table with remnants of the Last Breakfast—cigarette butts interred in the coagulated gravy, wadded napkins on the floor, pieces of change under a plastic cup. Brand new curses lovingly scribed into Formica, a hunk of gum with veins. He sat on calcified vinyl, watching for the waitress. Sort of a sport.

MAGGY, said her tag. Everyone was tagged. The fish in the stream, and the polar bear on the ice floe. This was the Information Age. Knowing What's What was half the game.

MAGGY asked him what he wanted. She did it telepathically, hand on hip, the interrogative frown a trademark of stoics and customer service personnel in any epoch. She'd seen Sweeney every weekday morning of several burned up calendars, and still she made the query, for it was possibly the height of professional courtesy to obey such rituals.

He said coffee, she poured it and rolled onward, appraising other mouths in the herd. She too was going places. Itzhak Bentov, the esteemed, albeit informal, poet physicist might've commented that she was already there.

Sweeney tried to read the paper, found his focus dilated telescopically. He couldn't grasp those paragraphs of multitudinous complexity, the small-town soap opera plot of places and events blown out of proportion, intumescent and malignant, somewhat staggering, yet squalid, as a drunk sailor on shore leave, or Saint Vitus wavering in a mural shot through a digital camera in the drunken sailor's paw. The typeset conspired with the graffiti. The implications were cosmic. He speculated for milliseconds what the plan was, couldn't begin to perceive its contours, much less the details, and gave up. He fixated on the pictures. Thus modern man was brought full circle to the chronicles of habit carved by hominids hunkered around tiny fires in limestone dens way back when.

Across the ocean, a medieval metropolis was catching hell. Domes burned. Thunderheads boiled atop black pillars. Panic. Chaos. Live coverage at 11. A sign read THE ROYAL ZOO IS CLOSED.

They got a grainy shot of a zookeeper in a dirty turban, face buried in his blackened hands. An emaciated tiger pressed its ribs against a cage door, appeared as if it could slip right through the bars. Its fur as matted as indoor-outdoor carpet, its eyes were sleepy. The tiger licked cracks in the concrete. Bandits had stolen the gorillas, the snakes and the elephants.

The Coalition couldn't get the water going. There was no power. There was no food. There was, however, plenty of hope. A child on a stretcher lost his parents in the shelling; people were searching for them, and incidentally, his arms had come off and nobody could find them either. He was smiling. In the background, a mob pulverized the Dictator's statue with sledgehammers, bulldozing a plot for the Golden Arches, a five-star hotel, something commercially utilitarian and ineffably American.

Sweeney flipped to the sports page. The Mariners were in spring training; they would take the West easy. He brought fifty dollars for the pool at the office. Suckers. His coffee was done. Sweeney folded the paper neatly. Like so, and so, and so.

—IMPREZIO—

The week before his last day at the office, Sweeney visited the doctor. Sweeney suffered cold sweats, heart palpitations, nausea, a whole laundry list. He was panicky, delusional, irritated, sometimes enraged, sometimes overcome with inchoate grief regarding events he couldn't quite recall and worse to come and it was nearly enough to drive a grown man to tears. Somebody somewhere once told him a good cry was as a lance to a boil. A good cry would set him right as rain.

Sweeney never cried, never shouted, never stuck a pencil in anybody's neck despite the often overwhelming compulsion to homicide engendered by modern life; nonetheless, things were not remotely copacetic. Of late, that being the last decade, give or take, Sweeney had devolved into an emotional oscillator. From moment to moment he wanted to swig sake and fly his Zero into an aircraft carrier; kick some teeth; flog his dog; flog the noisy neighbor; slit his own throat; start a fire; shoot his boss; quit his job; do heavy drugs, preferably peyote, or maybe mash-Allah in a hash-house in Amsterdam, or an authentic buffalo-skin teepee on the Great Plains and receive a vision quest; quit being a slave to cigarettes; send a letter bomb to P. Morris; get right with Jesus; join the cult of the homeless; screw a starlet, even an ugly one; or say screw everything and go home and hide under the covers until everything blew over. In the vernacular, Sweeney was freaking out.

The conversation between Sweeney and the doctor went as follows.

—Doc, I've got problems. I'm impotent, and I think I may be a racist.

—Why do you assume you're impotent?

—This woman moved in across the hall. And she's a hottie, see. She prances around in harem pants and a g-string, and yeah I want to, well, uh, know her. Biblically. God, I'm old enough to be her father. But, uh, well, that's not the problem, the problem is this: The attraction is purely

intellectual, a friggin' computer algorithm—you aren't hungry, but you see some shortcake, it makes your mouth water and you know you must want it 'cause you haven't had shortcake since Oppy split the atom. I look at that chick in the harem pants and want a piece of shortcake all right, but, uh, nothing's happening with me physically. It's like a psychotic Zen nightmare and I don't even know how to repair a goddamned motorcycle.

—Stress, Sweeney. It's all in your mind. I'll write you a prescription. Why do you think you're racist?

—'Cause I'm afraid of foreigners. Not the ones who live here, not unless they're wearing turbans and carrying satchels, ha-ha. I guess what it is, what I meant was, I'm afraid of other countries.

—Ah. Which ones in particular?

—I don't know. Which ones got the bomb or are getting it? China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, India, Pakistan for starters. Hell, France, Israel, good old U.S.A. A reformed coke fiend with a finger on the button; yeah I get scared of Texans, even the transplants, and their stupid hats, their baseball teams and Brahma bulls. They speak a different language. Call information sometime, you'll see what I mean. I guess it's irrational. Yeah.

—You're not just a racist, Sweeney. You're a xenophobe. I can help; here's another prescription. Allow me to refer you to a very fine psychiatric professional. I send all the doozies to him. Here's his card.

—What? No can do, Doc. I read the small print in the insurance manual. They only cover up to seventy percent of the couch time, no promises either. I'll shrink my head next year, when I can afford it. There's one thing though, maybe you can tell me if I'm schizophrenic. Or if I'm a paranoid schizophrenic. Can you be one and not the other, or is it always both?

—Perhaps you'd better tell me more.

—I see patterns lately. Everywhere. Clouds with cherub faces, dry leaves murmuring Chinese herbal secrets, paint peeled to make a symbol, a drop of blood trickling counterclockwise from the mouth of a dying pigeon. A car horn confuses me, makes me think big Gabe is blowing his trumpet. Shit like that.

—Oh, me too, Sweeney. Me too. Take a couple bottles of these, though. Just in case.

The mantra of Millennial anxiety: Mass Hysteria. Mass Hypnosis. Mass Production. Mass Transit. Mass Murder. Mass Media. Massacre. Mass Exodus. Mass Extinction.

Pundits said Hitler and Pol Pot gelded the term Genocide. That the Holocaust exhausted the fat muscles of pathos and empathy, unyoked them from their central gravity, sent them chasing after every rabbit, and gave the collective consciousness a callous. After Ted B. and Jeff D. the whole multiple homicide shtick was positively ho-hum. Social outrage was quarantined and relegated to splinter cells, underground presses, leftist political organizations and charities. Humanity was immunized against anguish. Horror was white noise, Misery the Muzak of a strip-mall culture. Everyone was terrorized and utterly fearless.

It may have been true, every bleeding syllable, except that morning in Pioneer Square, first a few, then many, woke up to the cold facts. Glaciers scraped these valleys; meteorites once studded the clay like a lunatic design on a masochist's tongue, excavated holes and trenches at the bottom of the ocean, added their traces of background radiation. Had civilization forgotten Vesuvius and Krakatoa? That Mother Nature likes to eat her children on occasion? No consequence—shortly, citizens of the empire were raw nerves on the hoof.

Sweeney didn't make it to the office. When he breached the plaza where the fruit market, the fiddle shop, and the Memorial lived, and Starbucks, ubiquitous as scotch broom, the trip was rendered pointless. The sky began to open its wide, toothless mouth, and that mouth slobbered the phosphorescent slime of prehistoric seabeds.

Doors were shutting, metal curtains dropping, police cruisers trolling, staccato blats of authoritarian comfort crackling from bullhorns and mouths gone flaccid with shock that pierced even the cops' shiny blue hearts. Janitors wearing sad masks emerged from recesses to take down the sandwich boards, spear the trash, sweep detritus from the stage. The big curtain began to drop, black on black.

The sun flickered, an oblong dwarf, and it seemed a little underdone, a soft yolk. The air acquired somber tints as if filtered by the lens of an artless cinematographer.

Tak Fujimoto wept.

A shudder passed through the city, the girders and the skeletons, and into bedrock. Afterward, a sound. A deep, abiding sigh as of vast lungs deflated. People walked in widening circles. People tripped over stalled cars. People vomited and cackled. People hugged their babies and their bibles. Atheists too. Dogs fell sideways and scratched until they foamed at the muzzle, bled from the eyes; pigeons heaved up on strings and smashed through plate glass, painted wet mosaics on granite. Stoplights shifted through their spectrums.

Sweeney tried to understand. He was puzzled why action figures were windmilling as they drifted from high-rise ledges; why billboards flashed random numbers; why small, hungry fires flickered in faults and crevices; why flocks of paper money whirled in funnels while seagulls plummeted in sheaves; why no one seemed to care. It was a recording. None of it was happening. Orson Welles, take your bow and sit down. Enough is enough.

Sweeney gazed into a salon on the ground floor of a hotel some local celebrity once nearly torched with a cigarette in bed after too much vodka. Beehive dryers were unoccupied; the drones had vanished, buzzed off. The TV blared. He fastened upon an image. A chasm opened, so he looked. The image fastened upon him. The chasm returned his glance. There was a brief struggle. Then it was finished. The dead German laughed.

—CODA—

Sweeney struggled home. A treacherous five-mile hike under cracked overpasses and through demolished neighborhoods. No vehicles moved. No birds sang, no children screamed. Nothing and nothing; just the erratic thud of blood in his neck and infrequent thunder that resonated far off without clouds. The air bruised purple. It filled the rippling sky; it was swelling.

Sweeney wasn’t in a hurry. He was steady as she goes. He was a tortoise, and happy for it. His wingtip shoes were dirty and unlaced. He stumbled. The asphalt grew sticky.

He remembered nothing of substance. He remembered a Frenchman and his submarine. Jellyfish. Portuguese Man o' War was a predator by committee. The Man o' War wore its stomachs on its sleeve, trailed whips and stingers in dragnets, ate its prey squirming. If the sky, by sinister alchemy, or diabolical prestidigitation, transformed into a mirror of the mother sea, the primordial cradle; and if leviathans swam that breadth and hovered, softly undulating over the teeming habitations of the globe, feasting; what should you wear?

He sweated. His thoughts trickled, disjointed, timid. He decided the poets and the painters, the sculptors and the writers, the crackpot theologians and their excommunicated kin, and the mystics had it right. Reality was a makeshift prop, an amalgamation of agreed-upon conjecture, a consensus of self-limiting parameters and paradigms made palatable by endless speculation fueled by madness and hope and no mean amount of good dope. Rubber science, bouncing like a handball off the nonexistent wall of a metaphysical gulag.

The sun? Scratch the surface and reveal a skull courtesy of Dalí's brush, Lovecraft's eye peeping through the socket, H.P.'s cruel dead lips whispering he warned us; he wrote the book.

The moon? No moon, only a sound stage in the Arizona desert. Stars were bullet holes in the galactic canvas. The day dark matter quavered in the pudding cup would be the universal gloaming of life as it's ordered. Today, in fact.

Sweeney didn't spy any looters and he wondered. Natural or unnatural? Did such nomenclature properly exist? Then he was at his building. He climbed the stairs, one by one, and entered his stark room. So small, artificial as a Hollywood set.

The light failed, the dim thunder faded into a well of silence. Remote and subterranean, a whale kept calling for its pod. Sweeney pulled the blinds and lighted candles; the electricity had fizzled and retreated into its maze of wires. The radio clicked and clicked and clicked and became too eerie, so Sweeney killed the switch.

Obeying an impulse good enough for a mayfly, an ancient biological imperative, he pressed his vanity across the hall with his nubile neighbor,

the hot girl in harem pants. Sweeney, being theoretically the last man on Earth, vowed not to flounder as Prufrock, but to brave rebuff with a ballsy grin and pick the bugs from his teeth as necessary. He brandished a murky bottle of wine he'd saved since forever, buried in a cabinet for emergency maneuvers.

He combed his hair. Knocked. No answer. He tried the door and beheld not a supple, buxom example of testosterone-aggravated fantasy, but a fawn-eyed old man in horn-rim glasses who resembled, exactly, Woody Allen, sprawled in a recliner, legs to the shins in a bucket of gray water. He appeared as melancholy as Sweeney felt. Each to each, they grunted apologetically. As Sweeney retreated, dignity in shambles, the old man said nothing; his face was overrun by shadow until just his glasses hung, gleaming.

Sweeney ground pills from three bottles in a salad bowl. The bowl was a Christmas present from his mother. He sloshed it to the brim with wine. Hail Socrates, Napoleon and Alexander, he swallowed.

He waited for another epiphany, impatiently at first. Dull reverberations made silverware hiss, a nest of adders. Came the dumb groan of the foundation. In the proximate below, scores of apartment doors slammed like a chain of collapsing dominoes. Now silence.

Nothing came to him. He yawned. For want of inspiration, he grabbed a spoon and meticulously carved his name and the date into the plaster. Below those, he wrote:

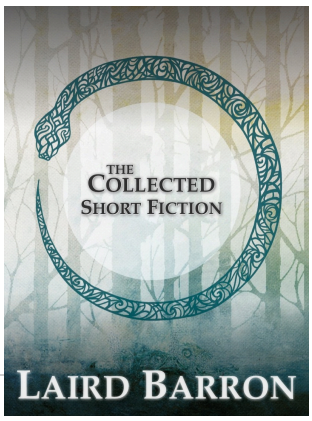
HERE LIES A SUPERNUMERARY WHO DESPISED THE OPERA

And a postscript:

KILROY IS DEAD

Sweeney crawled into bed and stared at the ceiling. He couldn't sleep, so he made shadow puppets on the wall. He made tigers and elephants, churches and church steeples and Polyphemus shaking his fist at the gods until the candlewick sighed and swooned into the wax and he lost the light. Then there was darkness and Sweeney began to snore.

Procession Of The Black Sloth



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"There are eighteen. One for every trespass."

Royce jolted and nearly upset his plastic cup of melted ice and vodka. They'd assigned him to a business-class window seat. The window was smooth and black. The rolled up blind rattled softly as the plane plowed ahead. He said, "Excuse me?"

"May I get that for you, sir?" A flight attendant leaned across a snoring man who'd fallen asleep with the overhead lamp on. The beam illuminated the sleeping man's slack face: Ted K., a computer monitor salesman from Cleveland. This was Ted's first trip to the Far East, could Royce imagine that? Fifty-seven years old come August and he'd never traveled outside the good old US of A. Thank God for adult education, huh? He'd talked animatedly at Royce for two hours, enthused about his prospects in the Asian market. He never got around to asking about Royce's business in Hong Kong before the Canadian Clubs did him in. Which was fine by Royce. He'd have only lied and claimed to be in marketing, anyway. Revealing to bored travel companions that your trade was a security consultant who specialized in countering industrial espionage tended to start conversations with no ending. *How did you get into that line, anyway? Well, I discovered I was a natural in the spy game while stalking my estranged college girlfriend…*

The attendant was small and as perfectly detailed as a doll. Her lipstick was very red against her face. Her hand brushed Royce's knuckles. Her red nails and lips and precisely bobbed hair complemented the two-piece uniform all the attendants wore. The girls were a matched collection, extras in a period piece. "Another, please," he said, slurring, his tongue heavy from unconsciousness and disorientation, more so than the effects of the liquor.

Flight drugged him as reliably as the copious quantities of alcohol and Dramamine he indulged in to combat motion sickness.

"Sir?"

"May I have another of these?" He released the cup and smiled to allay her concerns. "Thank you, miss." She poured more vodka from the tiny bottles they always handed out on flights, and left. He turned in his chair and watched her push the service cart away. The gallery was dim as a nursery at night, its gloom interrupted by an occasional reading light, the emergency strips bracketing the aisle.

Royce finished his drink and shuffled papers from his carry-on briefcase, stared at them without really reading. In order to actually read he would've needed to find his glasses and no matter what style he'd tried, the effect was always unflattering. Anyway, his head ached and he already knew the report front to back. Thoroughness was his watchword. *Let that be my epitaph—He was thorough*. He unbuckled and gingerly squeezed past his comatose seatmate whose snoring hitched then resumed.

The fore restroom was occupied and two women waited for a turn. The older of the pair scowled at him with annoyance and suspicion. *I must look like hell. Or smell like it*. He decided to make the journey aft, chuckling about how uptight some people got when traveling. It had been a long, long flight. Almost everyone was asleep, and the few passengers who weren't didn't glance up from their laptops or their paperbacks, but persisted in these activities with glassy-eyed concentration. Most of the passengers were Americans, and wasn't it the modern way to fill every waking moment with some gesture to productivity, no matter how minor?

His own friends always vowed to avoid calling the office, or God help them, work on vacation, but they always did, to some degree, or worse, they eschewed the innocuous emails to the office and treated their tours like contests. The winner accomplished the most in the shortest period and the prize was bragging rights at some future cocktail party or barbeque where the participants compared notes and the victors counted coup on the losers. *Skin-diving, white-water rafting, wine-tasting, a fifteen-mile hike on a nature preserve, tango lessons and the opera by ten pm, and that was only*

on the day we landed. How about you, Mildred? This obsessive-compulsive drive was a curiously American disease.

The rear facilities were vacant and he slipped inside and locked the door. He pissed, and as he zipped, the small fluorescent halo above the mirror sputtered and died. The cramped bathroom became black as a coffin. Royce hesitated, surprised and disoriented. He stepped back, feeling for the door handle which didn't seem to be in the right place. The light hummed and ticked and began to glow. Its elements ignited then failed in rapid succession and the ring pulsed within the surrounding blackness and swung like a pendulum. Its motion made him sick in the stomach. Between these staccato shutter clicks of light and dark, something happened in the tarnished mirror. He glimpsed a movement independent of his own obscured face, a momentary blur of alabaster like the belly of a large fish rolling on its back before it sank into abyssal night.

Certainly this entire sequence happened within the span of seconds. These seconds were elastic. They stretched to accommodate the flood of primeval darkness in his brain. His thoughts were jagged and fragmented; they swam against a tide. *I've got to be hammered. How many did I have? Those idiots should've cut me off. Wait—wait, how many did I have, really? What the hell was that?*

Normality was restored as the light brightened and illuminated the toilet in cold, sickly radiance. The shadows slipped back into their lairs. Royce blinked rapidly, weak from the adrenal rush. His face was green and gray in the mirror. He wiped away sweat with his sleeve and was in the act of passing his hands beneath the tap when he happened to glance down.

Holy Christ, somebody had an abortion in here! The plastic basin of a sink was splattered with black ooze; and not a little. He'd observed pro anglers fishing for sharks off the Barrier Reef, knew exactly what a bucket of chum looked like, and this was close, except for what might've been a hank of hair, maybe a whole scalp. He stepped back and almost tore the door off its hinges in his haste to escape.

"Whoa, Nelly!" Ted K. the salesman from Cleveland said as Royce collided with him. Royce gaped, at a loss as to where the man had come from so suddenly. Hadn't he left the guy dead drunk and sound asleep no

more than two minutes ago? Ted K.'s doughy features were lumped in approximation of genial alarm as he clasped Royce's elbow to steady them before they stumbled over the stewardess who was only a few steps up the aisle giving someone a pillow.

"Hey, guy," Ted K. said, and his hands were all over Royce, which compounded his anxiety—he hated being touched unbidden, and especially by a stranger, a neurosis doubtless rooted in some childhood trauma. He'd even occasionally rebuked his lovers for putting their hands on him when he didn't expect it. The plump man smelled overripe as fruit fermenting in a dark, humid place. "Where's the fire?" his fellow passenger was saying, sounding concerned, yet half smiling. Maybe he was enjoying this.

"Sorry, sorry." Royce was repulsed by the man's marshmallow flesh against his, but he'd almost bowled the guy over hadn't he? Good lord, what if an air marshal popped out of his seat and slapped cuffs on him for making a scene aboard a plane? He suffered Ted K.'s groping and just repeated his apology until the stewardess turned around and asked if everything was all right. He pointed at the open restroom and assured her that in fact nothing was all right and she'd better have a look. The attendant's expression changed into the mask people in the service industry put on when confronted with the irrational and unpredictable passions of the public. Her mask said, *I've lost most of my English and must confer with my colleagues*.

Royce recognized that look and closed his mouth. He gave her a fake smile and gently extricated himself from Ted K. and returned to his seat without a backward glance, his heart thumping in his throat. Presently, the stewardess appeared at his side and asked if he wanted another drink. He laughed at the preposterous notion; the last possible thing on Earth he needed was another drop. On the heels of this, he realized he sounded borderline shrill, hysterical. He made conciliatory noises, thank you, but no thank you. As she began to retreat, he risked asking about the problem with the toilet. Her mechanical smile told him she thought *he* might be responsible for the mess. "Plumbing. No need to worry. All fixed. Okay?"

Plumbing. They jettison shit at cruising altitude, you know. It freezes into a block and plummets to earth. Or is that a myth? Blue ice? God, I remember something about blue ice. Strange to think of such an inane urban legend.

Was that a piece of skull I saw? A chunk of jawbone? Royce started feeling cold and stopped thinking about the weird thing that had occurred in the bathroom. He preoccupied himself with football. He was a season ticket holder in Seattle despite the fact he seldom went, mostly passed his tickets to friends and associates. Nobody played football in Hong Kong. What did they play there? He had no idea whatsoever.

The plane was in its final descent when he realized Ted K. had never returned. Royce couldn't blame him, not after the whole incident. Regardless, the plane was filled to capacity and he briefly wondered where the guy had found another seat. Then the jet banked and the lights of the city were spread before him.

A large, impassive Chinese man in a black suit met him at the airport. Mr. Jen's face was crumpled and scarred as a piece of old, battered tin. He held a sign that read mr. hawthorne. The man wasn't tall, but as he carried the luggage Royce stared at his impressively broad shoulders and thought someone could probably project a film on his back. Mr. Jen put Royce in the backseat of a new Lexus and drove him directly to the offices of Coltech Ltd.

The office was an austere marble plaza of interlinked cubicles lighted by cozy lamps with woven shades. The grand Coltech seal, a lion rampant before crossed lightning bolts, loomed over all. Scores of stolid, crisply dressed employees conducted business with quiet determination; even the clattering keyboards and buzzing phones seemed muted in that cathedral vault. After checking with security he eventually located the right receptionist and waited while she unlocked a cabinet.

"Fruit basket?" he said.

She ignored the remark, muttering to herself as she rummaged through various folders. "Ah, there we go. Here is your Octopus card, Mr. Hawthorne. And the keys to your apartment." The secretary appeared to be North American, although she wore her beehive hair and heavy eye shadow and a bright yellow space-age dress in the popular retro fashion of young, cosmopolitan Asian women. She handed him an envelope containing a plastic card and three keys on a ring. She seemed impressed with his expensive suit, the Sicilian darkness of his tan. Her eyes flickered slightly.

“Unfortunately, the apartment won’t be ready until Sunday. Mr. James extends his apologies. However, he took the liberty of reserving a room for you at the Hyatt.”

“An Octopus card?” Royce said, bemused. He eyed the Möbius strip configured to form a sideways eight.

“‘Eight place pass’ from the Cantonese. A smart card, sir. For the train and the bus service. I buy cigarettes with mine.” She covered her mouth when she laughed.

“Ah.” He slipped card and keys into his jacket pocket.

“Mr. Jen will drive you to the hotel, if you’re ready. Oh, you have a three o’ clock tomorrow with Mr. James and Mr. Shea at the Demeter Lounge.”

“I see. Where—”

“Mr. Jen will get you there,” she said with a dismissive smile. “Welcome aboard, sir.”

The home office laid out the scenario when they originally brought him in. Coltech, a subsidiary of his employers at BelCorp, manufactured various technologies, including nuclear hydraulics systems and satellite components. They’d recently lost three territorial overseas managers to another firm; a much bigger fish on the international scene, and the deserting managers took most of their staff with them. Rumors surfaced regarding industrial sabotage, the sale of trade data, and an alleged network of moles piping corporate secrets directly to Asian competitors. Coltech got panicky and pulled a bunch of key personnel from domestic projects and sent them to China and Taiwan in a frantic attempt to secure operations.

The company drafted Royce to investigate two minor production facilities in Hong Kong—these factories were among the few that hadn’t relocated to Mainland China. Circuit boards and electronic actuators were assembled at one plant; hydraulic sleeves and rotary process valves at the other. His cover as a quality assurance consultant afforded him access to personnel files, factory records, and juicy trade documents.

Martin Reardon James and Miguel Shea, president and vice president of local operations respectively, explained the specifics in painful detail upon his arrival. Shea, in his role as major-domo did most of the talking during

that introductory meeting in the luxurious confines of an upscale restaurant with a view down the western slopes and their towers of blue glass, all the way to the China Sea. He referred to the enterprise as a snipe hunt. “But, hell, whatever makes the boys in Georgia happy…”

Royce understood he’d be flying solo on this one. Atlanta had warned him about these two and they proved to be exactly what he’d envisioned. The officers—hefty, florid men—relished the perks of scotch, women and leisurely afternoons on the golf course to the exclusion of all else and were most interested in maintaining the status quo.

“Shrink is to be expected,” Shea said, lighting a cigar and taking a few moments to get it properly smoldering. “No damned way we’ve got enough fingers to plug the holes in the dike. Pick your battles, kid. Have a drink. There’ll always be something for someone to steal.”

Royce waited long enough to be polite, then showed them a headshot of a blond, tan man in his thirties. “This is the individual I’m looking at.”

“You’re here to look at a bunch of people,” Mr. James said. He was a thick, older man stuffed into a hand-tailored suit. His shrewd, bloody eyes were drowsy in an illusion of complacency, of boredom.

Royce knew a shark when he met one and felt sorry for the poor bastards with the misfortune to fall under the man’s tender mercies. “I am. But this one… Atlanta likes him for some of your breaches. He may be the *architect*, in fact.”

“Who’s that?” Mr. James said. He took the photograph and stared at it.

“Brendan Coyne,” Mr. Shea said. Despite his debauched good-old-boy shtick, Royce figured he was the kind of guy who knew everything about everyone in the immediate company. Probably the kind of guy to have names for the rats.

“What’s his department?” Mr. James said. He downed a huge gulp of whiskey and looked at his watch.

“Consultant, communications.”

“Oh, yeah? Any good?”

“He’s good. What do you think? You hired him.”

“I don’t hire schmucks, do I?”

“No, indeed not,” Mr. Shea said.

“Neither does Atlanta,” Royce said with a dry smile. “As I said, I’ll be looking at Coyne. Among other people.”

“We hope you’ll keep us informed of developments.”

“I report to Atlanta. Orders.”

Mr. Shea scowled and waited to see if Royce was resolved on that point. “I see. Maybe you could, uh, do us a courtesy now and again.”

“Courtesy, Mr. Shea?” *Are you really thinking about bribing me?* A small part of Royce hoped they were shady enough to grease his palm for such harmless information. He considered himself a clean operator by industry standards; he pushed the boundaries without actually stepping over the line. A tiny bit of graft for harmless favors was simply a perk of the trade. He wasn’t being paid to investigate Shea or James, although they could hardly feel secure about precisely what Atlanta knew regarding their laundry list of petty indiscretions on the company dime. Nervous executives with deep pockets had done much to pay off his college loans and his mother’s tenure at the retirement home and potentially catastrophic hospital stay. Less nobly, such paranoid largess had also subsidized his vintage Mustang, a powerboat and a beachfront condo in Florida. “Absolutely, I’ll pass along anything I’m able. We sure do appreciate your cooperation regarding this unpleasant matter.”

“Anything we can do to help,” Mr. Shea said. “But I gotta say, Hawthorne. It sure feels like Atlanta doesn’t trust us.”

“Do they trust anyone?” Royce said. The tension exhausted him. He ordered another vodka, knowing full well he was at the top of a long downhill slide.

Mr. James grunted at the photograph. “Isn’t he pretty. I never liked pretty boys. Can’t trust some asshole who spends that much time on his hair.”

The next day, Shea took him into a wasteland of industrial ruins and gave him a tour of the only working factories within a mile. These were a pair of massive, rusting boxes connected by numerous catwalks, outbuildings and trailers. The vice president introduced Royce around and showed him his office, which was little more than a janitor’s closet tucked into the heart of

the structure where they manufactured the hydraulic sleeves. The hallways were slotted in a maze of grillwork and pipes with oversized spigots and valve switches painted in bright reds and yellows.

Royce couldn't have imagined a more monotonous, soul-killing assignment. Techs in hardhats, white coats and protective earphones rushed helter-skelter; workers were basically chained at the soldering tables and assembly lines. The laborers toiled sixteen-hour shifts in heat and noise, suffering these conditions for a menial wage; they received few breaks and were subjected to verbal and physical abuse from native overseers Royce knew would shock the hell out of working stiffs in Detroit. He had to admit, the Chinese were the perfect workforce. They slaved away as if the Devil himself were standing over their shoulders.

When not pretending to perform as a Coltech functionary, Royce was ensconced in the Lord Raleigh Arms, a housing project on the outskirts of the moribund industrial district. Lord Raleigh Arms, or the LRA as its inhabitants referred to it in casual conversation, was an exclusive compound reserved for employees of several affiliated companies; the executives, researchers and engineers who made things tick. The area proved quite pleasant, defying his expectations. Ministry officials desired a good face on things; they installed an arboretum and a couple parks to screen the quarter from defunct factories and warehouses and miles of tract slums.

The compound consisted of concrete and glass wings configured as a rectangle with a hollow center. There were guards at the gates, closed-circuit monitors, and regular patrols by the municipal police. Corporations paid for the private security forces. Terrorist threats weren't entirely uncommon, nor plain old kidnapping plots. Some employees had drawn indefinite postings and brought families—protection details were a basic necessity. The bulk of Royce's neighbors were Americans, Brits and Germans. He retained Mr. Jen to chauffeur him through seedier parts of the city; should he require special services, his company's hosts delegated a native to attend his needs.

His apartment was an economy model: a bedroom/living room combination, a pocket bath and closet-sized kitchen, all done in monochrome green and yellow. Fortunately, he traveled light, because the closets were tiny and there wasn't much room to hide anything particularly

sensitive. This was why as a first order of business he purchased a small fire safe to secure hard-copy documents and other important items he couldn't encrypt on his computers.

Every piece of futuristic, plasticized furniture, every stainless steel appliance, radiated an aura of sterile, passionless utility. The terrace overlooked a quadrangle occupied by a swimming pool. The tile deck was decorated with plastic lawn chairs, folding tables, and umbrellas. Even during the rainy season, it attracted gobs of raucous kids. Come warmer weather, a score of elderly denizens slithered out of hiding like worms after a storm. Many of them wore dust masks common in China and Japan because the smog was so bloody awful. They congregated under the umbrellas and smoked generic cigarettes and bitched about the weather, the pollution and the kids.

Friendly residents warned that despite evidence of extensive remodeling, such cosmetics masked a host of problems. Plumbing leaked and power came and went at inopportune moments. At such times, the elevators were out of service, and the air conditioning offline. Then, the population of the Lord Raleigh Arms endured the blackness of sweltering apartments and listened to cockroaches scrabble in the hollow spaces behind freshly painted gypsum. Sirens bugled in the city where its towers formed the corner posts of a skein of nictitating lights.

He'd scarcely unpacked when he overheard complaints about noise, especially in regard to loud music practiced by an amateur flautist in a nearby block; then there was the indelicate matter of bag people creeping around late at night. One of his fellow American neighbors, an engineer he'd met in passing, heard a noise in the hall, an odd knock at the door. When he checked through the peephole, an eyeball blinked at him. "The freak's face must've been squashed up against the door!" The engineer was an excitable fellow given to padding bare-chested in striped pajama bottoms around the foyer and community annex. He said he realized the "freak" was a woman when she stepped back and ran away, giving him a better look at her. "Scurried, I mean. Like a cockroach hit with a light. Moved pretty fast, too. All this blasted security and we can't keep bums out! Next thing you know, we'll be getting stabbed in our beds, or rolled up in a carpet and carted off for ransom." For their part, the security personnel did

immediately capture vagrants who slipped in on occasion, but denied the existence of any permanent interlopers.

Similar stories ran through the block. Elvira, as the English-speaking residents referred to the haunt, in reference to her black dress and bone-white face, seemed the most popular object of speculation. Elvira didn't haunt alone, in any case. One of the janitors confided "little friends" followed her around.

"Kids?" Royce said, thinking of the brats shrieking through the hallways, wild as the painted savages who populated Golding's dark vision.

The janitor, a sunburned elder statesman in blue paper work clothes, shook his head emphatically and motioned near his hip. "No, no. Little friends." He glanced nervously over his shoulder, then back at Royce. He smiled with the obsequious reflex of a career servant, and pushed his squeaking cartload of mops and brooms down the hallway of doors toward the distant elevators.

The sweep proceeded routinely and monotonously—the life of an investigator was unglamorous and fraught with glacial tedium. Prior to his insertion, he'd been provided a list of "at risk" technologies and the names of persons associated with them. It would've been impossible to monitor the scores of individuals who might be involved in nefarious activity. Instead, he relied on the installation of state-of-the-art security software designed to track anomalous activity on the company network. He received authorization to order a couple dozen wiretaps of private residences. He outsourced the data collection to local specialists and quickly acquired potential informants with connections to the black market. Occasionally, he arranged casual social meetings with subjects on the list and recorded all conversations via a microwire and relayed details of these transactions to his handlers back in the States. The bulk of his work was as involving as watching paint dry.

Royce felt restlessness more keenly than usual. This wasn't a run-down burgh in Soviet Russia, or a backwater in the South of Italy. This was Hong Kong in all its glitz and glory, a great, seething den of LED-brilliant iniquity; and him marking the hours like a two-bit private eye who'd been paid to keep tabs on a cheating spouse at the local Dew Drop Inn.

Many of Royce's colleagues frequented a posh cocktail lounge a few blocks from the compound. The bar was called the Rover in honor of its itinerant patrons; a smoky, dim place with poker lamps on chains over the lacquered chestnut tables, and curtained booths; the kind where three sides rise six feet and one could practically jam a small dinner party inside. The help were strictly locals; cute-as-buttons Cantonese girls who might be high school sophomores or thirty-year-old mothers of three. A burly ex-fire chief from the Bronx ran the show. Jodie Samuels was quite the character; gods, he looked uncomfortable in a suit and tie. Something of a taskmaster; he didn't have a choice about Asian servers, but he'd only hire white bartenders and chefs; forced HR to ship in personnel from England and America.

Racist management notwithstanding, the lounge ran like a top. They'd tucked an exclusive billiards room in the back; a gentlemen's club. Billiards weren't popular with the regular crowd and most of the power players belonged to swankier, more prestigious clubs in the hip, upscale districts; however, it served as a convenient niche to entertain guests and relax after a stressful day at the office.

Royce wormed his way into Samuels' good books because he received an outrageous per diem and wasn't shy about spending it. Samuels probably could've scored a new Cadillac from the tips Royce left him. Before long, Royce got the nod to enjoy the accommodations. A small group of businessmen made the place their home away from home and he became chummy with many of them. They smoked cigars and drank a lot of XO and swapped more lies than he cared to remember. All this in order to maneuver close to his quarry, the irrepressible Brendan Coyne.

It wasn't difficult to make the connection: he spilled a drink on Coyne's shirt, bought him another round and insisted on picking up the cleaning tab. Soon they were comparing their exploits as Americans at large and marveling how they lived a stone's throw apart. After that, they socialized at the Rover three or four evenings a week. He methodically compiled a list of Coyne's business associates and social acquaintances, flagging several of these as potential conspirators. Coyne possessed peripheral ties to the Hong Kong underworld and a onetime convicted CEO of an extinct American corporation. In itself, these casual associations proved little; Royce

personally knew and consorted with a baker's dozen crooked lawyers, accountants and corporate officers, most of whom functioned quite efficiently within their various organizations; a bit of skullduggery, like the graft Royce loved so well, went with the territory. Nonetheless, this compounded the difficulty of ferreting the truth about Coyne's extracurricular activities.

He knew plenty about his subject's personal life at this point: Coyne's father, a career Army lieutenant, dropped dead of a heart attack at a formal dinner a couple years back, and Coyne summoned his aged mother to Hong Kong rather than abandon her in Seattle among cold-hearted relatives. During their frequent interactions, Royce applauded his associate's loyalty while secretly speculating about his ulterior motives. Royce had been forced to put his own mother in a home and he doubted a would-be playboy like Coyne had an altruistic bone in his body.

Coyne and his mother lived in an apartment across the quadrangle. Coyne was a hard partier who'd broken up with a longtime boyfriend and developed a neurosis about staying in shape. He munched on trail mix and lifted weights at the gym every other day, basted himself in a tanning booth with regularity, and did laps in the pool at night; he invited Royce to join him. Royce laughed. All the chlorine in China wouldn't have persuaded him to stick so much as his toe in that water. "The sauna in the executive washroom suits me fine, thank you," Royce said.

Royce kept him under constant surveillance. He purchased a small, high-powered telescope from a shop that catered to private detectives and suspicious spouses; the proprietor dealt in hidden cameras, thumbnail recorders, lowlight scopes, and other apparatuses. During the day, he positioned a video camera on his terrace in a bamboo blind, lens oriented at Coyne's apartment. At night, he killed the lights and watched through his telescope while Coyne moved from room to room. On Tuesday and Friday when his mother was away at the community center playing bingo, Coyne slowly undressed, habitually lingering at a panel mirror in the bedroom. Other nights mother and son shared dinner before the dizzy blue screen of their television. He frequently made innocuous calls on the landline to his brother in Seattle, other colleagues overseas, a stock advisor in Taiwan; nothing damning; nothing remotely interesting, in fact. Coyne observed

these rituals until his clockwork emergence for two dozen laps in the pool. The mechanical repetition of the affair caused Royce to ponder his own patterns, the automated nature of humans in general.

Other days, he followed Coyne around the city, making note of his itinerary, the people he visited. There wouldn't be any momentous revelation, no potboiler twist. Ultimately, success in these matters boiled down to the inexorable compilation of data.

After nearly a month of monitoring Coyne, lassitude eroded Royce's patience. It was an inevitable consequence of prolonged field investigations. Hyper-sensitivity, too much liquor and caffeine, cigarettes and lack of sleep coupled paranoia and mania to birth a form of high-functioning schizophrenia. Before Hong Kong, he'd kicked smoking and reserved his drinking for infrequent social occasions; both habits had returned with a vengeance. Such were the hazards of his occupation; alongside venereal disease from liaisons with barflies and unscrupulous prostitutes, and death or imprisonment at the hands of disgruntled foreign interests.

Sometimes, during the grind, he allowed himself to daydream about his erstwhile college plans to become an engineer, to marry the cute orthodontist in training, Jenny Hodge. Paranoia had always been a problem, though. *You never could buy the fact a babe like Jenny saw something in you, surely she was laughing behind your back, making time with the rugby stud in her dorm*. When she discovered his love of telephoto lenses and hidden microphones, his paranoid fantasies came home to roost. She sobbed during their melodramatic breakup scene, said she figured he'd lied about everything, when the truth was he'd only lied about half and the half was harmless, mostly. *Bye, bye, sweet Jenny, I loved thee well. Here I sit, fifteen years older and wiser in big bad Hong Kong trying to hang a guy by his testicles for corporate espionage. How much damage has he done? A hundred mil? Two hundred? Shit, I'm the poor man's James Bond. Eat your heart out, baby*.

As his mind wandered, he tended to focus on peripheral subjects: the elegant young lady in a single bedroom diagonally opposite his unit who'd moved in after the apartment waited empty as a cave; the previous family departed within a day of Royce's arrival after setting the place afire due to a stovetop mishap. Each evening she paraded in the choreographed flood of

track lights, nude, but for a shiny waist chain and a bead necklace. Then the blond European couple, apparently engaged in a ceaseless war punctuated by broken windows and routine police visits. And finally, a squat, gray-haired woman named Mrs. Ward who trundled onto her balcony after dark and played shrill, discordant tunes on various woodwinds, she being the flautist so reviled in certain quarters of the LRA.

Royce learned she was a chief organizer of senior activities—the chairperson of bingo tournaments and the Saturday evening mixer in the Governor White ballroom. Something in her corpulent stature, the pagan timbre of her horrid musical pretensions, riveted him. She resembled almost completely an aunt on his mother's side, Carole Joyce, a dowager widow with a place just outside San Francisco. Mom and Dad pawned him and his brother on her one summer. He didn't remember much about that, except the house was gloomy and full of dusty furniture, and his aunt filled him with loathing. Carole Joyce had been a large woman as well, and vaguely unwholesome in her appetites. Her fetishes hadn't diminished with age. She enjoyed erotic art and favored French Renaissance gowns the better to display her ample cleavage; she wore black eye shadow and ghastly white pancake makeup that didn't blend where it ended under her jaw. Aunt Carole Joyce slept in her makeup, seldom scraped it off, preferring to add a new layer every morning. She was a dilettante spiritualist who'd managed some travel and vacillated between Buddhism, Taoism and more esoteric systems according to whim. Aunt Carole Joyce was particularly fascinated with punishment and doom and she'd told a wide-eyed Royce numerous hair-raising parables about wretched boys in foreign cultures going to the thousandfold hells in a hand basket where they were inevitably certain to suffer the most exquisite torments imaginable. *Be glad you're an American. We've got just the one hell*.

A bloated creature in her sixties, she prowled the boardwalks for handsome, tanned young men, solicited them with cash and gifts to come up and swamp the scummy pool and to hack at a halfacre garden, which had been overgrown for some thirty years. Royce was nine or ten and didn't know much, but he figured from their behavior Aunt Carole Joyce gave them the creeps too. She certainly went through a number of the strapping lads in the three months Royce spent in captivity. He never discovered

whether his aunt tossed them aside, or if they cut and ran of their own accord.

Whenever Royce caught sight of Agatha Ward, he instantly revisited that summer with Aunt CJ and shuddered, but couldn't look away. Indeed, Royce cultivated a morbid preoccupation not only with Mrs. Ward, but the whole tribe of female elders. Mrs. Tuttle and Mrs. Fox, the inseparable canasta partners; Erma Yarbro, an emaciated wasp from Yonkers who made no secret her dislike of the Far East and its inhabitants; Mrs. Grant, who'd lost her legs to diabetes and trolled the quadrangle in a motorized wheelchair; and solemn Mrs. Cardin, an inveterate smoker with a button in her trachea. He fixated upon their poolside klatches, knitting parties and weekly luncheons at the community annex.

These women brought to mind so many seniors he'd known over the years, familiar in the interchangeable way of babies; they were the ghosts of teachers, librarians and neighbors who'd populated his childhood, although they didn't behave in the torpid, desultory manner of other seniors. Their movements seemed vigorous, their interactions lively. Occasionally, he caught a strange sign pass among them as they played at cards, or reclined poolside, soaking up infrequent sun; an occulted ripple of intention, a shibboleth that spoke of subterranean things; and some late nights, he spied their movements in the courtyard as they formed in disorganized groups and filed out of the compound. He felt like an anthropologist stealthily documenting the customs of an alien culture; scientist and voyeur in one pathological bundle.

He recorded hours of footage of Mrs. Coyne doddering about the courtyard, kibitzing with her friends. Occasionally, he paid one of the teen criminals loitering at the bus terminal three hundred Hong Kong dollars and a carton of cigarettes to follow the ladies on their weekly excursion to the shopping mall. He gave the kid a belt buckle cam and told him to stick tight and note if Mrs. Coyne talked to anyone besides her associates or the vendors. Royce studied these films in the bleakest hours of night, chain-smoking while lumpen, blue-haired women clumped on subways and tour buses, soundlessly jittered through boutiques and gift shops and food courts and traded gossip like a covey of magpies.

Chu, his agent in this intrigue, revolted after the fifth mission. They'd rendezvoused at night on a train platform. Rain hammered the shell of the station's slanted, plastic roof, poured from the lip of the overhang. Mist absorbed the fluorescent glare, the shuffle and scrape of commuters knotted in small groups, heads down and listless as cattle.

"I don't like them," Chu said. The boy was tall and whip-lean with black, spiked hair and a nondescript face. He wore a Houston Rockets warm-up suit and numerous cheap, death's head rings and was rumored to be affiliated with the Tong.

When Royce handed Chu his money and asked why he was quitting, Chu stuffed the bills into his jacket and lighted a cigarette. If Royce closed his eyes, the kid's voice would've conjured an image of any of the chess club nerds he'd known in high school. But Chu was way past all that; he slumped against a lamp post, shoulders hunched, his posture that of a razor half-folded. He looked a lot like an exchange student Royce tangled with his sophomore year. A real hardcase who brought the mean streets of Seoul with him. The Korean had worn rings, too.

"You want more money," Royce said.

"No. I'm done."

"You're done. Why are you done? Because you don't like them? The old women?"

Chu spat. His teeth weren't pretty. He sucked on his cigarette, almost panting. "Yeah."

It was suddenly so clear to Royce. "You're scared of them… you probably get sick to your stomach from old folks' smell. That stink of urine and sweat. The way they smack their lips and quaver when they talk. Yeah, very unpleasant, I'm sure. So much for revering your elders."

"C'mon, Whitey don't count."

"I thought you were tough, Chu."

Chu laughed, squeaky and hoarse. "Stupid Yankee." He flicked his cigarette over Royce's left shoulder into the surrounding darkness.

Royce didn't give him the satisfaction of flinching. "Then you must do what's best for you. I'll give the job to one of your associates. *They* look

hungry."

"Not as hungry as you think, Yankee-doodle. Good luck with… everything." Chu raised his hood and slunk away, giggling. He was certainly correct regarding his friends—they uniformly ignored Royce's efforts to recruit them; none even acknowledged his halting attempts at Cantonese, and he soon abandoned the effort. In the days to come, Chu disappeared from his usual haunts; one of the shopkeepers thought he'd been arrested, or dragged off by rival gangsters. In either case, the disgruntled merchant didn't much care. He spat and professed joy at the hoodlum's absence; gods grant it be a lengthy one.

Later that week of Chu's defection, Royce staggered into the Rover after an evening of crashing from one strobe-lit dance hall to another in the wake of James, Shea and an entourage of yes-men, call girls and assorted hangers-on, all in the name of entertaining a visiting dignitary who owned a piece of the company, or wanted to buy one, it was difficult to recall.

He slid into an empty seat, nodded greetings to Gerald, the late-shift barkeep, and ordered a whiskey sour to match his mood. He'd downed the first and started on the second when he noticed the woman who resided in the unit across from his own standing near the end of the crowded bar. He'd gotten her name from one of the guys at work and switched into spy mode.

He ran her name through his formidable network and soon amassed a dossier. Shelley Jackson recently signed on as a cultural attaché for Coltech, her specialty being an interpreter of several Chinese dialects. The job dispatched her to points hither and yon on frequent diplomatic junkets; it was highly implausible he'd ever run into her at either of the factories, her sphere being of another cosmic order altogether. Her parents were well-off. She'd graduated from Western with honors and routinely traveled abroad since high school. She was single, although she apparently took frequent lovers—older, affluent men as a rule. Royce figured her for a pleasure seeker, a woman who thrilled in the proximity of power, rather than possessed of any agenda so mundane as gold digging or career advancement.

Tonight, she wore severe business attire—a gray skirt and white blouse—and chatted with an older fellow in a loose, silk shirt and suspenders; tall

and lean with unruly black hair to the waist of his baggy, linen pants in a manner Royce identified as pure Eastern Euro-trash; a Balkan gangster prince at least a decade too old to dress as he did. Manny Poe, Manicevic Poe, something similar. An investment banker who occasionally frequented the billiards room. He put his mouth close to Shelley Jackson's ear and she laughed.

Shelley Jackson's dark hair was cropped in androgynous affectation, a style his old girlfriend Jenny had adopted near the end of their stormy run, and when she briefly glanced at him, Royce's cheeks warmed from the sensuous quality of her appraisal, the carnal thrill of his secret knowledge of how she glistened beneath her buttoned-down exterior. She returned her attention to the executive and didn't glance back again; not even to acknowledge the drink Royce had Gerald set before her.

He ordered a revolver of bourbon and tracked down Coyne in the billiards room. The man lay sprawled across a leather divan, his hair tousled, shirt unbuttoned to the breast, shoes propped on an ottoman. He smoked a Cohiba cigarette and watched two other men playing a game of baccarat. Royce didn't recognize either of them, they were in the fog that enveloped the world two feet beyond his center of gravity. He flopped across from Coyne and steadily gulped his stein of booze.

Coyne whistled softly. "Well, there's a sight. You look like a tiger what's gotten free of its pen."

They made small talk, reminiscing about college and their families back in the States, and as each spiraled deeper into drunkenness, Royce deftly steered the discussion to mother Mary and her social ring. Coyne expressed annoyance regarding his mother's newfound hobbies. "The damned busybody crones," he said.

"Who?"

"That's what Mom calls them. There's about a dozen of them—a tea party club without the tea. I asked her, 'Mom, isn't that a bit derogatory, referring to them as crones?' and she says, 'Oh no, that's what they call themselves.' I guess one of the ladies, Agatha, is a hard-line feminist. Agatha goes on about patriarchal oppression, ageism—especially prejudice against old women—and similar natter. She convinces her elderly chums to take back

the so-called epithets, like hag and crone and treat them as tools of empowerment." Mary spent a majority of her time with the ladies, which should've been a relief for Coyne, considering how worried he'd been to locate companionship for her in this new, alien environment; yet as the months had worn on, some indefinable element of their communal bonding disquieted him.

"Bingo and knitting," Royce said with boozy assurance. "I doubt it's anything to get stirred up about."

"I dunno. They resent my *lifestyle* choices; Mrs. Grant—you know, that wretched woman with the wheelchair—says it's a rejection of the female as partner and mate. Mom stays out till all hours—I caught her sneaking into the apartment around dawn last week. She acts like a rebellious teenager."

"Second childhood. Sounds like Agatha's reliving the Women's Movement and bringing your mom along for the ride."

"Maybe. Those friends of hers… I found out Agatha hired on with a company as a clerical administrator so she could move into the Arms—"

"You spied on your poor mother's friend? You devious fellow."

"She flew halfway across the world to live in *this exact building*. What the hell is up with that?"

Royce said, "I've seen them go out at night. Very late. Kind of odd, I thought."

"Oh, yeah. That's the procession. Crazy bitches."

"The what?"

"The Procession of the Black Sloth." Coyne puffed on his cigarette and exhaled toward the lazily revolving blades of the ceiling fan. "Agatha's a religious nutter; thinks of her group in spiritual terms. Mom says the sisterhood originates here in the East. A sort of passive-aggressive protest against centuries of male dominance, which seems rational enough, all things considered. Rebellion against foot-binding and the like. There's a concentration of true believers in this area come to make obeisance to a guru who lives in one of the slum tenements."

"Black sloth? I don't get it. Why a black sloth?"

“Jeez, Hawthorne, you should ask them. I don’t even remember if it’s a sloth. It might be a black weasel or a marmot.”

“Yeah, never mind. I probably don’t want to know anything about a black weasel,” Royce said.

Coyne swished the ice in his whiskey, concentrating on the glass with utter melancholy. “Anyway, Agatha’s into these late-night strolls. Moon goddess nonsense, or some such effing crap. I’m not much for religion.”

“Me neither. Sunday school hangovers lasted a lifetime.”

“Soon as I escaped parochial, I burned my boy’s suit and never looked back. Mom was raised Catholic, see; she goes to mass at the cathedral on Bonham. This hoodoo isn’t like her.”

Mama’s boy. Royce filed that away, too. “Don’t worry. My own dear mum went through a New Age period. She wanted to commune with Atlanteans.” Which was a convenient lie to put Coyne at ease, to cement their bonding moment. His mother had been an Easter and Christmas Lutheran and that was the extent of her spirituality. She’d been more interested in the PTA and the little wine and cheese parties her friends held while pretending to have a weekly reading circle. His dad referred to it as her weekly “get loaded and gossip” circle. “Before you know it, it’ll be back to bunt cakes and macramé. Just this morning I saw a bunch of them huddled outside playing canasta.”

“Yeah, maybe. Say, c’mon over for lunch with us tomorrow. I’m barbecuing. You like ribs, don’t you? Mrs. Ward and a couple of her cronies will be there. You can meet my mom, see what I mean.”

“Uh—” Royce hurriedly considered possible excuses.

“For the love of Baby Jesus, I’m begging you,” Coyne said. “You can’t leave me alone with them.”

Royce grudgingly agreed, although he actually welcomed the opportunity to chat with Mary Coyne and Mrs. Ward. Perhaps some unexpected providence would result.

He fixed an Irish coffee and sipped it while sitting in the gloom of his kitchen. The kitchen was spotless except for his dinner plate in the sink, a segmented trail of cigarette ashes on the table, and a mussed edition of the *I*

Ching he'd accidentally kicked under a chair. Its pages were coming unglued and he'd left thumbprints on them, but couldn't call to mind anything of substance. The symbols were pretty and meaningless. He'd bought a dozen similar works when he first arrived in the city; just went to the biggest chain bookstore he could find and swept them into his basket along with tourist pamphlets, cookbooks and a couple regional histories in hardback. Eastern philosophy wasn't his bag; he did it because that's how it went wherever he stayed for any real duration. Being the perfect social chameleon demanded attention to the minute.

Presently, the familiar, discordant strains of Mrs. Ward's flute filtered through the wall and drew him into the clammy, dank air. When he stepped through the sliding glass door, the awful piping ceased mid-note, as if to accentuate a dramatic pause. He stood on the balcony and regarded the spectral façades of the Raleigh Arms. The pool glowed dully, a cradle of stagnant phosphorescence like mother of pearl embedded in black mud on the sea bottom. The water reflected upon the surrounding tile, the iron slats of the courtyard gate and the abutting concrete walls. Across the way, Coyne's apartment lay dark. However, a dim lamp flickered in the Jackson woman's window, and he waited a long time in the damp smog to catch a glimpse of her. The light snuffed abruptly. He lingered a moment, then went unsteadily inside.

He dozed in his chair, flicking through the five hundred channels advertised in his digital cable package. Old war movies and serials from America, big-game hunting and sports fishing, talk shows, the regular junk. He waded through the weird local stuff shot in low def at raves, and incomprehensible talent shows that were a cross between performance art and improv. Then there was the Asian horror cinema, which was gaining popularity abroad, but left Royce cold. He lingered on one bizarre scene: A man in office clothes shuffled into a vast cavern and approached what soon resolved as a mountain of knife blades. The man raised his hands, fingers bent into claws, and threw his head back and wailed, an Asian Charlton Heston. The man fell to his knees, still wailing, and crawled to the mountain of knives. On all fours, he began to climb.

Royce really, really hated horror, and the Eastern garbage wasn't any better than the kind they served in Hollywood. He surfed to a game show.

Everyone was Asian: the audience, the announcer, the contestants, except for an American, a white guy in his fifties who wore a ten-gallon hat, a bolo tie and a well-cut suit. He was the spitting image of a guy who'd operated a salvage yard in Royce's home town. The contestants were taking turns answering questions highlighted on large board. When somebody got a question right, a rabidly grinning hostess in a polka-dot summer dress hopped in place and waved her tiny hands in abject joy. The words on the board were Chinese characters. Royce found he could get the gist through body language and deduction. It was surreal to watch the American cowboy's mouth move and hear Chinese come out. The man answered enough questions correctly and lights flashed, klaxons blared and parti-colored streamers billowed down in a storm. The grinning hostess scurried to the American and pinned gaudy ribbons to his breast while the host leaned on his podium and gabbled frenetically. The curtains slowly raised to reveal a shiny new jet ski.

Royce thought he'd cheerfully kill anybody who drove a pin through his twelve-hundred-dollar suit. The cowboy looked down at his breast, apparently sharing Royce's sentiment. The cowboy grabbed the hostess by her ponytail and jerked her toward him. He began punching her head. It was a farce, it couldn't be real, not with the way her arms and legs flew around like a crash dummy pitched through a windshield.

The TV image wavered and shrank and the people were folded into themselves. The lights in the apartment went out. The air conditioner whined to a stop and the room lay as dark and silent as a vacuum. He dopily marveled at the feeling of being cast adrift. Little by little, his eyes adjusted and signs of life penetrated the blackout: disjointed voices echoing from afar, the dim thump of bodies moving in the apartments above his own, the sullen orange glow of the city skyline.

A series of malformed thuds rattled glasses in a cupboard. He lay there, groggily staring into the gloom, trying to shake the lethargy of booze and bone-weariness, the quicksand gravity of his recliner. There came another sound, a low, raspy warble: a frog calling from the dark. The little beasts often hopped in from the surrounding parks, the encroaching marshland, and made their homes in the wet shadows along the pool until housekeeping came along with nets and buckets and carried them away. This vocalization

was much deeper, more resonant and suggestive of inordinate size. However, as the sound repeated, its utterance was more a croak than the glottal wheeze and gasp of some other creature; almost a moan.

Thud. Someone struck his door with a fist. He reached over and tried the lamp, but the switch clicked, dead, so he fumbled through the apartment, flipping other useless light switches as he went. The air pressed him, dank and smothering as a foul, wet blanket.

Royce navigated the minefield of his apartment without breaking anything and staggered into the door and almost opened it before he sobered enough to remember where he was and who might be on the other side: corrupt government agents; terrorists; bandits; any of a dozen kinds of riffraff who might mean him bodily harm. He knocked a shade from a lamp, gripped it in his left hand. He located the peephole by touch and screwed his eye against the opening, not expecting to see much, if anything. A trickle of yellow light suffused the hall, its origin probably the threshold of some open apartment door. Someone wept, their faint moans emanating from a hidden source. The sobs were muffled.

He unlocked the door and stuck his head out. One of his neighbors, the German software designer, a couple doors down and across the way, had indeed set a paper lantern on the mat in the hall and Royce guessed the man probably stumbled off to wake the superintendent. The German was a can-do sort, the sort to burn the midnight oil. He'd been around since Hong Kong went back to the Chinese and was a veteran of these all too frequent LRA adventures.

Precisely at the outer ring of lamp light, a big lumpy sack slid and bumped along the floor, disappearing into the dark. Slippers rasped against tile and the sob sounded again, farther away, descending into the depths of the building. A man on another floor shouted foreign curses that echoed down through the grates and vents; these were answered in kind in a groundswell of slamming doors and broom handles rapped against pipes, grievances kindled by the humidity and heat, the ungodliness of the hour.

"Elvira?" Even as Royce invoked the name, chills raced along his arms; he clenched the muscles of his buttocks. He tiptoed a few steps down the hallway, compelled against his better judgment. The passage seemed to

expand and contract with his pulse, as if he were being squeezed through an artery. He stooped to retrieve a wig where it had fallen upon the dingy floor. The wig was lush and black in his hands and smelled of rank cologne and cigarettes. The unwholesome intimacy of touching it sent thrills through his already weak stomach.

He went to bed and was asleep in moments despite, or perhaps in response to, the bizarre and somewhat shocking encounters of the evening.

Shelley Jackson, warm and slick and hungry as death, slipped under the covers. She kissed him and worked her hand beneath the waistband of his pajamas. She rolled atop him. Her eyes were lidless stones. Her throat bulged, impossibly bulbous, a pearly sac. She croaked softly and her frigid tongue unspooled into his mouth before she brought a bag down to cover his head. When the rough burlap closed over Royce's face, he inhaled to scream and Coyne, who replaced Shelley Jackson somehow, put a sticky finger against his lips, a shushing gesture that communicated a world of terror. They were mashed together, their breaths humid in the suffocating enclosure, the tightening ring. Coyne's face was also sticky; it seeped and ran like syrup from the broken skin of a peach.

Shh, Coyne whispered. *For God's sake.*

Royce clawed at the bag, woke thrashing and half-crazed with terror.

The next morning Royce noticed odd smudges on the outer panel of his apartment door; distorted imprints, as if someone had stamped his or her muddy face against the wood. One was near the top of the frame; two more below his knees. He grabbed a camera and snapped a few shots, such was his disquiet. After, he rang the front desk and a custodian soon arrived with a bucket and a sponge to wipe the unseemly marks away. It took the man over an hour of diligent scrubbing. The marks were stubborn.

Royce visited Shea and mentioned he'd enjoy meeting Ms. Jackson. Shea guffawed and said she wasn't exactly hard to get, but here was an invitation to a company soiree, all the same. Jackson would be there to smooth the way with the Chinese, who, like men anywhere, were amenable to a pretty face and a flash of cleavage.

Meanwhile, lunch with the Coynes proved a bizarre affair. Royce arrived a few minutes early with a bottle of wine and a bouquet of cheap flowers he'd

picked up at the grocery. He said hello to Mary Coyne, who answered the door in a bulky sweater and fleece pants. “I’m frightfully chilled in this climate,” she said, indicating her attire, and indeed her hands were cold in his. “Bad circulation. Since I was a girl I’ve had bad circulation. Just terrible. A condition, you see. My, aren’t you handsome today.”

Royce wore a polo shirt and cargo pants. He’d taken time to get his mustache trimmed at the salon and spent several minutes rehearsing sincerity before the mirror. In his experience, elderly women were readily disarmed by young men who dressed and smelled nice. Polite, well-groomed lads were considered trustworthy. He also wore the wig he’d taken from the hall and was mystified by his compulsion to do so. His own hair was dark, and, yes, thinning a bit at the crown, yet not unattractive considering he kept in decent shape with light calisthenics, a few laps here and there on the treadmill at the gym.

God, it’s started. Cuckoo time. Yeah, yeah—it’s happened before. You really go bugshit on these missions, man. That job on the oil refinery. You wore the Slav’s corduroy jacket for a month. And that one guy, the dude from Arkansas, you swiped his cowboy boots and the buckle with the razorback. Why do you do shit like that? It’s the chameleon trip, isn’t it? How did you score their personal belongs, by the way? They ran out on their jobs, just lit out without a goodbye or screw you. Funny how that works… Where do suppose this wig comes from? I’m sure it’ll be a surprise.

It was hardly just the wig. Only last week he’d come across an expensive wristwatch and a class ring inside his safe and had no idea how they got there. When he worked out these items had belonged to Ted K., the boring guy who’d shared his flight into Hong Kong, he felt ill again, just like he’d been sick the previous night. He managed to resist the urge to wear the ring and the watch, and tossed them into a Dumpster instead. He considered, and not for the first time, it might be wise to visit a therapist and discuss whatever subconscious demons were eating him. The main reason he didn’t was primarily because he already knew what the doctor would say—a man could hardly expect to live a double life without facing a few consequences.

Mary accepted the flowers, exclaiming it wasn’t necessary. “We’re only having lunch, for goodness sake!” She rushed into the kitchen to pare the stems and get them into a vase, calling out that Brendan was on the deck.

Royce followed the odor of charcoal and sizzling beef to the terrace where Coyne turned fat slabs of beef on the grill with a big prong.

Coyne handed him a beer from the ice chest and waved at a patio chair. He squinted at Royce, and frowned. “Is that a wig?” And when Royce neither confirmed nor denied this, he frowned again and let the subject drop, although he shot odd glances for the remainder of the afternoon, his expression a mixture of petulance and fascination.

They sat and drank beer and smoked cigarettes and made small talk about the weather and work, until the rest of the lunch party arrived. Mrs. Ward slouched into the apartment in a red and gold mandarin gown that clung and cleaved to her bulging thighs, the rounded curve of her belly. Her rose-lipped mouth grimaced and gaped, and slightly crossed eyes twitched with astigmatism.

Royce carefully shook her fleshy hand and tried not to stare at the wattles of her neck or the wen on her chin.

“Mm-hrmm, my you *are* certainly a handsome one,” Mrs. Ward said, and her voice slid forth, gravelly and low, descending to a murmur at the end of the sentence. She licked her lips and grinned with half her mouth, lending her the aspect of someone who’d suffered a minor stroke. “Lila, isn’t he a handsome boy? A bit long in the tooth for a boy, but you take my meaning.”

“Why, my stars, yes.” Lila Tuttle emerged from Mrs. Ward’s shadow, a moon orbiting its planet; frail and wrinkled and bent as a twig, she smiled ceaselessly and with vacuous conviction. She wore a shawl wrapped around her head and clutched an ancient handbag to her bony breast. “Lovely to meet you, Mr. Hawthorne. Lovely, lovely indeed.” She pecked a lock of his hair with a long, hooked nail the color of a chicken’s foot, and tittered.

The merry group retired to the kitchenette for plates of ribs and steins of Sapporo beer Coyne had imported from Japan. None of the elderly women was particularly fastidious in regards to tucking into the meal. Mrs. Ward gnawed at the bones with an almost sexual intensity that called to mind the hoary old painting of *Saturn* chewing his hapless children to bits. Mrs. Tuttle and Mrs. Coyne followed suit. This concordance of slurping and smacking in lieu of conversation turned his stomach.

“What are you reading today, Mrs. Coyne?” Royce said by way of distraction from the unsavory relish of the diners. He noted the Coynes kept many books on hand; dozens of paperbacks and magazines were scattered about the apartment; romances and travelogues on the main, and older, clothbound tomes stacked on a floor-to-ceiling rack in the living room beside the television. He recognized the faux mahogany shelf as the exact model he himself had purchased from an upscale department store.

Mrs. Coyne and Mrs. Tuttle twittered and tee-heed over some romantic claptrap they’d been perusing. Then, Mrs. Ward said, “I’m enjoying *Journey to the West*. Have you ever read that one, Mr. Hawthorne?”

“It sounds familiar.”

“Mrmm-hmm, a classic, I daresay. My father was something of a bibliophile. He worked for the great museums in England and Germany. They sent him to the four corners after antique manuscripts. A few he kept for his library at home, and some of these he read aloud to me when I was a child. His copy of *Journey to the West* is exceedingly rare, perhaps an original. Father related it to me in Mandarin, no less.”

Coyne snorted and Royce could tell the man was more than a touch drunk from all the Sapporo he’d been downing. “I find that difficult to swallow, Mrs. Ward. An extant copy of *Journey to the West* would fetch a fortune on the collectors’ market. Surely you’d have cashed in by now.”

“You speak Mandarin?” Royce said quickly. “And what else, I wonder.”

Mrs. Ward shrugged and smiled into her napkin. “I dabble here and there; enough to get by in the country if I’m ever stranded on the mainland. Are you married, Mr. Hawthorne?”

“Divorced. The traveling life doesn’t agree with everyone.” Actually, Royce had lived with Jenny, the future orthodontist, for several years, but he’d never actually gone so far as marriage. He was interested to see her reaction. That, and when it came to his personal history, he was a habitual liar. “Why do you ask?”

“No reason, really. And children? You don’t seem the type, but then who knows?”

“I hate children.”

“Do tell. Don’t we all, eh?” Mrs. Ward licked a bone; her tongue lolled overlong and came to a point. She probed and teased forth the marrow. Her face seemed a feeble mask slipped over the crude geometry of some atavistic visage. Her inflection remained neutral. “Not much call for children in this modern world, I suppose. Nor marriage. The need for fecundity has passed into twilight, yea.”

“I have three daughters,” Mrs. Tuttle said. She counted her crooked fingers: “and eight, wait, nine grandchildren. Angels, they are. Mary?”

“Only Brendan. He was quite enough, I assure you.” Mrs. Coyne crinkled her cheeks to soften the barb. Royce thought he glimpsed a darker current beneath kindly seams and tender wrinkles, a flex of the iris like a shard of ice heeling over into the depths. It was not difficult to envision the source of her jovial bitterness; perhaps a deep, ragged cesarean scar, a white fissure ripped along the once-tanned axis of her bathing beauty abdomen. Baby Brendan would’ve consumed her best years; frightened away the pretty men, repaid her maternal generosity with shriveled breasts whence his greedy mouth had sucked dry all semblance of taut youth.

“Is that why you’ve journeyed to the East, Mrs. Ward? To free your sisters from the yoke of institutional patriarchy?” Royce said, averting his gaze from Mary Coyne’s flaccid chest. He shuddered at the unbidden image of infant Brendan feasting there; a fat, red leech.

“Watch yourself, dear Brendan. This one’s a tricky devil.” Mrs. Ward patted Coyne’s arm, although the man was so deep into his cups Royce doubted he understood the implicit warning.

Can she know? How in the hell could she? Royce gulped beer to cover his discomfort and confusion. “I’m hardly a devil, Mrs. Ward. A humble cog in the great machine and no more.”

“We know our hell-dwellers, and you are certainly one. Girls?”

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Tuttle said and Mrs. Coyne echoed the sentiment. “A handsome white devil!”

“Don’t worry, dear,” Mrs. Ward said. “Nothing personal—all white men are devils here. Especially the British and the Canadians. You aren’t a Canuck, thank heavens.”

“Yeah, thank God for something,” Royce said, relaxing slightly.

Lunch petered out after that. Coyne brooded and the old women nattered about cards, shopping and whose kids were doing what. Royce excused himself. Mrs. Ward took his elbow at the door. She said, “You should do more than window shop.”

“Excuse me?” Royce said.

“Miss Jackson. The girl in 333. She’s very charming. You should take a chance. I think the two of you have common interests. She’s a bird watcher.”

“I don’t understand what you mean, Mrs. Ward.” Royce kept smiling, kept playing it cool. *What the hell is your game, lady?*

“Don’t you?” A shadow crossed her face. Her eyes congealed in their sockets. “Try to join us at one of our weeklies. Miss Jackson has promised to come make the acquaintance of my circle.”

“Oh, um, sure. I’ll have to drop by, then.”

“Yes. Please do that.” She released his arm and extended him a motherly pat on the cheek. Her thick, sharp thumbnail pressed lightly into the flesh under the hinge of his jaw and Royce’s head swam with the childhood memory of a butcher shop, and the butcher in his ruddy apron sizing up the raw red meat, slapping it with his left hand, bringing the cleaver with the right, and whistling a wry, cheerless tune while customers waited in a line, batting the occasional circling fly with their newspapers, their parasols or panama hats.

Royce said goodbye, and as he escaped into the hall, Mrs. Ward leaned out and said, “Safe travels. Oh, and Mr. Hawthorne, do be careful about answering your door at night, hmm? In this place, you never know who might come calling.” She shut the door on his answer.

He’d been combing his stacks of video and photographic material in a mindless evening ritual held over from one of his first cases, when he turned up a cartridge labeled CHU/6. Chu’s series of surveillance tapes ended at number five. Royce scratched his head and ran the feed through his television so he could relax in his armchair with the lights turned down.

Right away, he decided he’d definitely made some odd labeling error.

This wasn’t a surveillance tape, but rather a homemade documentary. The documentary was filmed on a handheld and the picture shook as the camera operator walked. An old, old heavyset Chinese woman in a nurse’s pinafore was giving the unseen narrator a tour of what seemed to be an abandoned sanitarium. She carried a flashlight and swept its watery beam over ceilings that leaked plaster and stringers of wiring. Piles of debris littered the corridor. The corridor was notched by small white iron doors. She stopped at each door, pointed and muttered into the camera. Dubbing was poor and her mouth and the sound from her mouth moved at different speeds.

“Di Yu,” the nurse said in a hoarse monotone. “Di Yu. Di Yu.”

When the camera zoomed in on her pointing finger, one could resolve metal placards with lettering. 2: CHAMBER OF GRINDING, said one. 8: CHAMBER OF MOUNTAIN OF KNIVES, said another. “Di Yu. Di Yu,” the nurse said. Her face was white and soft as dough, except for her eyes and mouth, which were black. “Di Yu. Di Yu.” She came to a larger door set into a slab of masonry. The door was barred and heavily corroded by rust. Its placard read: BLACK SLOTH HELL.

“Aunt CJ.” Royce was certain. That was his dearly departed Aunt Carole Joyce under the chalky paint. No, no, that wasn’t right. It was Mrs. Ward, how could he have missed the malice in her eyes, her awkward gait?

A jumble of misaligned frames heralded a scene change, which slowly resolved as the interior of a room. Darkness prevailed except for a glass cube spotlighted against a black backdrop. The cube was a museum display on the order Royce recognized from childhood visits to the Met, the kind of massive box intended to house dinosaur exhibits. Shadow-figures assembled at the base of the display, dwarfed by its immensity, the sheer girth of the specimen preserved within. He’d seen the animal on a grade school field trip, had seen it since in a dozen evil dreams, this father of cold sweats and night terrors. The thing reared in excess of twenty-feet high; it might’ve snapped the back of an elephant, torn the tops from trees. Its pelt was oily and black. Its claws were also black and hooked like daggers. The metal tag on the exhibit said: *Megatherium. S. America, ca Pleistocene epoch*.

There was a difference from Royce's personal beast, however. This relic, this patent fabrication, a paleontologist's reconstruction with its artificial fur and sawdust stuffing, was a hybrid of the museum curiosity he'd seen in the tour group with all the other bored sixth graders. Vaguely toadlike, somehow obscene; its shape altered for the worse as shadows moved across its monstrous bulk.

The camera swooped in tight. Dozens of naked men and women pressed against the base, hands splayed and grasping. Their skins sagged and drooped from the relentless gravity of age. More ancients shuffled and crawled from the outer darkness to prostrate themselves before the idol, and in their eagerness to worship, they pressed the first rank and crushed them until blood shot against the glass. The petitioners moaned and their cries echoed the bestial croaks he'd heard in the night outside his door.

Mrs. Ward stood among the mewling throng, her white face and white pinafore shining. "Di Yu. Di Yu." The camera zoomed tighter, tighter, focused upon her mouth, and the tape ended.

Royce's skull felt like an anvil. He rose to make for the bathroom and almost tripped over a body. Before he could yell, lights came up, revealing the bald furnishings of a decrepit theater. The projector was still shuttering, splashing arcane symbols on the screen. A half-dozen filmgoers ignored him as they retrieved jackets and hats and squelched along the seedy aisles toward the exits.

He rushed to the lobby and accosted the girl sweeping popcorn from the carpet. She recoiled from his urgent demands for information. What theater was this? When had he arrived? Who'd brought him here? She spoke no English. Her manager didn't know much English either, was only able to relate the name of the theater—The Monsoon Gallery, which specialized in independent and art films. The man wrung his hands and implored Royce to leave in peace. There was no record of a ticket transaction; perhaps he'd been drinking and stumbled in through the side door, yes? Many fine bars were located nearby, much action! The manager's bewilderment and distress seemed genuine.

Royce gave up haranguing him and wandered into the street. It was nearly eleven pm. According to his watch, he'd misplaced about four hours. He

caught a taxi and rode the twenty-odd blocks back to the compound. Unsurprisingly, the security at the gate had no record of his leaving the LRA that evening.

He locked himself in the apartment and searched for the tape. Two hours of ransacking his desk and file cabinets, the dozen or so cardboard boxes jammed in a closet, proved fruitless. In the end, he slumped at the kitchen table and covered his face with his hands. Television laughter came through the vents.

Ming Cho, chief liaison to a mainland conglomerate that contracted Coltech to manufacture jet navigational computers, had invited a bunch of management types to dinner at a Mandarin restaurant. They arrived late because of traffic. Tardiness was a major faux pas in China; fortunately, Ming proved extremely acclimated to Westerners' legendary indiscretions and he cut them some slack. He and his cadre of flunkies arranged an elaborate banquet: music, pretty dancing girls, karaoke.

Marty James climbed on the stage at one point, his three-hundred-dollar haircut mussed from the attentions of the party girls, his tie loosened so it drooped low across his considerable belly, and led the restaurant in a rousing chorus of "Camp Town Races" until he almost pitched head over heels into the front row of diners; Cho and Liu Zhu came to the rescue and dragged him back to the table, the trio red-faced and nearly bawling from exertion and hilarity. Zhu kept refilling his glass, any glass within reach, with rice wine, shouting, "Gombay! Gombay!" the Chinese equivalent of "Bottoms up!" The Americans who responded were dropping like flies. Royce managed a few half-shouted pleasantries with the lovely and alluring Ms. Jackson. Her handshake was warmer than her eyes or her impersonal smile. She'd arrived in a white dress cut down the center and slashed up the flanks and the men seemed to have trouble keeping their mouths shut.

There was an exception, however. About two-thirds of the way through the meal Royce noticed Bill Zander—Billy Zed, the resident Brits called him—staring at the crowd. They'd pulled two tables together and barely had enough room for the whole party. Bill was down at the end. Royce couldn't ask him who he was looking at without shouting. He ignored Bill for a while, but then the junior production manager made an awful expression. It reminded Royce of candid photos taken at amusement parks of people on

the rides, some of which were classic studies in human terror and vulnerability.

Such was Bill's expression. His face sagged and his mouth did the same. For a second Royce thought Bill would begin to shriek right there in that packed restaurant.

Oh, God, how much has that silly s.o.b. had to drink? Royce craned his neck to see what the hell was going on. It seemed as if Bill was staring at a table full of Germans. Nothing odd about those people, except they were drunk and noisy, probably competing with the Coltech crowd. Gradually, he concluded Bill wasn't looking at the other table; he'd focused on a copse of rubber plants: big specimens in ornamental clay pots. The restaurant could've doubled as rainforest on a movie stage; yards of exotic plants, bamboo and hanging vines. Groupers and lobsters drifted in dim aquariums —one picked out one's own dinner and a guy with a net on a pole scooped it up and hustled it into the kitchen. He didn't spot anything particularly unusual and Bill eventually settled down, although he drank enough of the house whiskey to put an Irishman in a coma.

When the party finally staggered outside to load into cabs, he caught Bill's arm and asked if he felt all right. The man was so boozy, he'd gone cross-eyed. Bill clutched Royce's coat and pulled him close and whispered he'd seen something in the rubber plants. He slobbered gibberish on Royce's collar, whimpering about children, terrible little beasts. Bill's expression raised the hairs on the back of Royce's arms.

Shea privately informed him Bill had partaken earlier of some particularly potent Thai grass they'd gotten from a Cambodian in the Mount Victoria region. Allegedly, the stuff carried an LSD-class wallop with a plethora of nasty side effects—including total, all-consuming paranoia. Bill became incomprehensible and started singing pieces of the Chinese pop song he'd mangled during his turn at karaoke. Royce and Shea carried him to the curb. He puked all over his pants and they packed him into the cab. His luckless compatriots protested mightily and tried to pitch him back into the street. They might've succeeded, except Royce and Shea pressed their bodies against the door until the taxi rolled away into the bright scrum of traffic.

Royce offered to share a ride with Shelley Jackson. She raised a brow at the spittle on his collar and declined, joining forces with Shea, James and Cho as they went club-hopping in a company limousine.

Everybody forgot about him standing in the rain before the restaurant exit. There were no more taxis. He stuck his hands in his pockets and let the sidewalk crowd sweep him in the direction of home away from home.

Midnight found Royce and Coyne, a disconsolate pair, lounging poolside. Balmy drizzle cut through the smog, plastered their hair, their clothes, glittered in puddles in the dips of the tiles. Neither of them were particularly sober; however, as Coyne pointed out early on, he wasn't nearly as drunk as he'd have preferred. He'd returned from a black tie affair thrown by some Texas tycoon. The fellow who invited him, a foxy corporate lawyer, disappeared on the arm of some other guy. Aggrieved by this unceremonious treatment, Coyne did his best to decimate the open bar. After a couple loud arguments with better-dressed, better-connected guests, he got tossed into the street by a squad of bull-necked security people and ended up walking two miles back to the safety of the LRA. An ill-advised shortcut through the park resulted in his tripping over a bush and sliding on his ass down a small hill.

He sat with his head lowered, his white shirt splashed with mud, dinner jacket a sodden lump between his feet. He'd removed his shoes and socks and dipped his feet to the pants cuff into the pool water.

Water rolled in its shallow basin, scuffed by the rain and an occasional gust, and slopped over the rim onto the deck. Shelley Jackson's light blinked on and silhouettes moved against the drapes. He cursed, and wondered wherefrom this irrational jealousy.

"Behold!" Coyne said with a sarcastic flourish.

Figures emerged from the building, pale and wan and silent as ghosts. He recognized them: Mrs. Degive from 129, tall and hollow-eyed, her nightgown hung drenched as if she'd crawled from a shipwreck onto some night shore; Mrs. Yarbro and Mrs. Tuttle shuffling together like recently separated Siamese twins; and Mrs. Cardin, tapping with her cane, free hand to the hole in her throat. They gravitated toward the pool, shambling with empty determination (except for poor, crippled Mrs. Grant; she humped

along the ground like a centipede): the women bore the witless expressions of sleepwalkers, their spectral forms lighted by undulating reflections from the shallows.

Agatha Ward coalesced near the dense shadows in the courtyard entrance and winded a brief, decadent trill on her panpipe. Her face was dark and convulsed; the face of a medieval goodwife transfixed in agonizing labor. At her side hunched a lean, pale youth, nude but for a pair of goggles on a strap around his neck, and a pair of immodestly snug swim trunks. He stood, eyes to the ground, awkwardly bowed at elbows and knees. His ankles and wrists were apparently bound. His head was shaved and it shone in the eerie light.

Agatha bared her teeth, glared blindly. She opened a service door inset between the entry arch and a shrub, and the women filed through into darkness. She went last, leading the youth by his wrist; the boy half hopped, half staggered. The door shut behind them, its edges vanishing neatly as the edges of a spider's trap.

"Oh my God." Royce blinked water from his lashes. "I've seen them down here a few times, but I never got a good look at… Was that the—what did you call it?"

"Yeah," Coyne said. "What've I been saying? The old broads are effing creepy."

"Who the hell was the kid with them?"

"I dunno about the kid. One of those kinky buggers from a sex club, I bet. The witches are gonna use him in a fertility rite. 'Course their snatches likely got cobwebs growing in 'em, so a lotta good it'll do."

"You're kidding. You mean they fuck him?"

"Who knows? Why not? This is the East, my friend. Freaky shit all around us, all the time."

Royce tasted acid. He found a cigarette and spent a few long moments lighting it in the rain. His hand shook. "My brother was a swimmer. Good body, like that kid."

"Yeah?"

“Yeah. Search and rescue diver for the Coast Guard.” Royce nodded and dragged on his cigarette until the smoke scorched his lungs and he came up gasping. “He died. Good looking kid. Left a lot of girls crying.” They sat like that for a while. Finally, Royce said, “God, that’s too weird for me. Where’d they go?”

“Huh? Inside.”

“I know they went inside. I thought they usually went out, into the community.”

“What, you think the bus to the casino runs this late? Ask the schmucks at the gate if you wanna know.” Coyne chuckled bitterly and splashed his foot. “Who cares, man? Who gives a shit, anyway? Aren’t you sick of this place yet? A party every night. Rich slants with bad skin and worse teeth holding court. Buncha effing hyenas. Give a brother a drag?”

Royce handed him the cigarette. He immediately thought of long-lost Chu and the honking brays of laughter; of the mainland business partners who’d attended the dinner, the slyly insouciant glances they’d shot Shea and James, these latter worthies grown sleek and sanguine with food and wine, and complacency; wild pigs softened from their more vicious natures. “Hyenas and boars,” he said. “And not a lion in sight.”

Soon it grew cool and they were out of cigarettes. Each mumbled his farewells and tottered off to bed. Royce lay on his back, still dressed in his soaked clothes and shivering from a chill. In the twilight divide between waking and dreaming, he replayed the bizarre tableaux at the pool a hundred times. The boy looked over his shoulder and Royce met his brother’s eyes, his frightened cow eyes…

The next Saturday mixer got started earlier than usual. Royce straggled in from a meeting with his local support crew and saw a crowd gathered near the entrance to the ballroom and community annex. He slipped through to his apartment and laid out some casual evening wear and then took a quick shower, contemplating the merits of making an appearance downstairs.

An email message from an unknown sender blinked in the inbox when he climbed from the shower; it had been piped through a secondary account known only to his handlers in Atlanta. He opened the message with a laptop reserved for correspondence that might compromise the sensitive

documents on his primary computer. Encryptions were made to be broken; such was the axiom of a journeyman intelligence officer he'd interned under after college. Royce kept four computers on the premises, each with a specific backup or decoy function, each protected with the latest and greatest high-tech ciphers the lab boys could devise. Their hard drives could be wiped at the press of a key.

The message itself was blank with an attached video file. The label said: M. POE.; D. ANDREWS; J. STEVENS. CHAMBER OF MAGGOTS. His heart began to speed up. Royce clicked it, watched the video begin to load. He lighted a cigarette and went to the terrace. It was a calm evening. People continued to gather around buffet tables set up in the quadrangle. Electric light poured through the open doors of the community annex. Orchestra music from the ballroom and bits of conversation drifted past him, carried toward a surge of stars that blazed through breaks in the omnipresent smog. The Saturday mixer was generally a muted affair, an attraction for the geriatric set and a few young lonely singles. Agatha Ward had secured a sextet from the philharmonic and it had drawn this lively crowd of suits and dresses, among these an amazing number of couples who hadn't yet achieved the half-century mark.

He crushed out his cigarette, returned to the computer, sat patiently until the video loaded and a slightly unfocused image flickered on the monitor: black and white, interrupted by wavery lines and occasional fuzz; probably shot by a security camera.

A garbled voice intoned, "*Those who perform crooked deeds and malpractice are thus served*."

The location appeared to be a large, drab room; a storage area, perhaps. It possessed concrete walls and floor, a dangling bulb swollen with feeble light. The bulb swung gently, casting shadows at weird angles. A trio of figures stood in a loose triangle near the center of the room; Royce couldn't discern their genders because of the bad lighting and the individuals' voluminous garb. They wore heavy robes or dresses; their faces were obscured by cowls.

What the hell is this? He didn't like it for several reasons, not the least of which being the anonymity of the sender. This, and the footage with its

isolated stage and motionless actors, the enigmatic intention of whoever lurked behind the camera, evoked a sense of creeping dread. Several minutes passed and the image remained static. Royce glanced at his watch, considered calling it quits and catching the tail end of the party. Agatha Ward had left an invitation suggesting Shelley Jackson would be in attendance. The prospect appealed to him despite the utter lack of encouragement Jackson had shown him thus far. He couldn't bear the idea of being alone with this eerie video. It reminded him too much of the last bizarre film he'd stumbled across, the one that precipitated, or was a product of, a delusional episode. He reached for the escape key.

The picture stuttered, shifted to a different camera angle, this one slightly off center and much closer to the figures. From this new, extreme perspective, he perceived minute twitches of hands and limbs, the abrupt shudder of a torso. Small chunks of something dislodged and fell. Straining to comprehend the bizarre nature of the image, a very bad thought occurred to him. He located his seldom used bifocals, unfolded them and slid them over his nose.

He trembled to realize from a telltale sliver of reflected light the figures were suspended from the ceiling by slender wires that terminated at their necks. He couldn't detect how these wires were attached.

A hangman's noose? A fishing hook in the spine? A film school prank? Their robes, their cowls, gray-white through the cheap lens, were not cloth at all, but rather colloidal masses of rice slathered to naked flesh. The rice squirmed upon them like a living, bloated thing. More gray-white pudding spread around the feet of the triad, flowing up from drains in the concrete floor. The closest figure raised an emaciated arm in a weak, swiping gesture at its face, and a charcoal-dark eye yawed wildly. The video ended.

M. Poe. Manichev Poe, the Balkan investment banker he'd seen at the Rover with Shelley Jackson. Manichev Poe of the open-collared shirts and long, black hair. He'd never heard of Andrews or Stevens. Doubtless they'd committed the sin of crooked deeds as well.

Royce swallowed hard and wondered briefly if he was going to be sick. He chewed on his knuckle. Once the fogs partially receded, he initiated the protocol to wipe the hard drive. Then he lifted the computer and carried it

into the bathroom and smashed it repeatedly in the tub until only bits of circuit board and snags of wire remained.

The phone beeped for God knew how long before he shrugged off his daze and picked up. The line was dead by then and the display logged the caller as anonymous. He decided to fix a drink, but the scotch was gone and the last beer too; even the mini bottles of Christian Brothers he kept in the pantry, with the oatmeal, flour, and mouse traps.

Royce walked downstairs without recollection of forming the intent to leave his apartment. Full dark had come and the sodium lamps kicked on, masking the faces of the guests in shades of red and amber. He scooped several glasses of champagne from an unattended platter, retired to one of the small tables, and drank rapidly and with little pleasure.

Agatha Ward waded toward him, Shelley Jackson in tow. “Mr. Hawthorne! I presume you remember Miss Jackson. I’m thrilled you decided to join us.”

“Everybody was having such a swell time, I couldn’t resist.” He rose unsteadily and nodded at Shelley Jackson. “A pleasure to see you again.”

Shelley Jackson was dressed in a mohair sweater. She radiated ennui. “I’m sure. Well, Agatha, thanks for the party. I’ve an early flight to Beijing—”

“Why don’t you dears visit a moment while I attend to some crashingly dull social niceties?” Mrs. Ward smiled with implicit cruelty at the younger woman, ducked and bobbed in pantomime, and retreated.

“Damn it,” Shelley Jackson said. She snapped her fingers at a melancholy waiter in a tuxedo jacket and bade him fetch her a double bourbon, neat. She downed it without a wince, eyed Royce hatefully, and demanded the bottle. She said to Royce, “Where’d we meet, anyway?”

“At that Mandarin place, the other night—”

“Yeah, right. The guy threw up on you.” She chuckled, low and nasty. “Nice. I’ve seen you around, haven’t I?”

“I live right up there.” He pointed, but she didn’t follow his gesture, concentrated on her bottle. The champagne was hitting him hard now; his cheeks were numb and he had to carefully enunciate. He plunged recklessly ahead and killed another glass, pouring it down his throat to stifle the sense of misery and helplessness.

"*Love* your hair," she said.

"Thanks," Royce said. They stood shoulder to shoulder; close enough he smelled her bath oils, the sweet exhaust of gin on her breath. "Cigarette?"

"No. They ruin your teeth."

He lighted one for himself, suppressed the urge to fidget with his lighter. After the silence between them dragged out, he said, "A mushroom walks into a bar—"

"Oh, shit."

"A mushroom walks into a bar. Sees this gorgeous woman sitting by herself. So he buys her a drink and asks if she'd like to dance. The woman looks him up and down and finally says no thanks. And this mushroom is pretty deflated, so he asks why not. The woman says it's nothing personal, 'I don't dance with mushrooms.' And he says, 'Oh, c'mon, I'm a real fungi!'"

She delicately wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her sweater. "Can you?"

"Dance? Sure. I learned to tango at charm school."

"I meant in your condition. You're pretty shit-faced. Besides, the band's calling it a night."

She was correct; the sextet began to break down their instruments and pack them toward the gatehouse. Royce sighed. "Maybe next time. The Rover has live music on weekends. If you like jazz hits rendered by girls whose English consists of "hello, mister" and most of the words to most of the songs—"

"Here's a better idea: Why don't we nip off to your place and have a nightcap."

"I'm out of stock" he said, trying for a light touch.

"Or better yet, let's skip all the bullshit. I'll get down on my knees and suck your cock. Does that work for you?" She tilted her head to meet his eyes. Her face was smooth and white and luminous.

Royce floundered for an appropriate response; between the horror show of a video, the half-magnum of pink champagne, and the surrealistic conversation, it took several seconds to deduce she'd been toying with him.

Heat rushed through his skull and he overcame the nearly overwhelming urge to crack her across the face, to grab her shoulders and shake her until she rattled. His gorge rose; he forced his fingers to unclench. He said, “I suppose you’re good with your mouth. James and Shea know talent when they see it, right?”

She chuckled and flipped the bottle underhand. It splashed in the pool. “Nighty-night, sweet prince. Go sleep it off, hey? You stink like a rat.”

Rat? There was a provocative choice of words. Shelley Jackson and Agatha Ward must’ve compared notes. Maybe they knew something, maybe he’d slipped along the line; his work was art, not a perfect science, and he was far from flawless—especially of late. He was up to his neck in mistakes. For the first time in an age, he wanted to go home, whatever that meant. He could take a vacation, look up some of his college buddies, an old girlfriend or two with whom he hadn’t managed to burn every bridge.

“Screw you, bitch. You look like a boy, anyway.” Shelley Jackson was too far away to hear, but the morose waiter gave him a pitying look as he came to retrieve the empties. The man used one of the deck chairs to snag the bottle floating in the pool.

Agatha Ward stood near doors to the ballroom in a tight circle, which included the building superintendent, an elegant gentleman named Bertram Harris; Mrs. Tuttle; and several geezers Royce vaguely recognized from around the complex. Mrs. Ward waved to him as he listed for the elevator. Her body rippled and became transparent, revealing her skeleton suspended in its jelly. The bones were too long, too sinuous for a woman of such enormous girth; her spine recoiled like a chain of knives as her skull swiveled to track him. The mirage fanned outward and the crowd was abruptly transfigured into a mobile of skeletal X-rays. For an instant the flesh of his own hand gave way to showcase his finger bones, the metacarpal with its scar and the pins from a long-ago biking mishap in the Pyrenees, the slender tube of forearm—

Royce collapsed into the lift. When the doors parted, he’d gone completely rubbery and had to slide along the wall to his door. *Too much champagne*. Or something more sinister. He’d heard the cautionary tales about Mickeys in the wine, the date rape drugs kidnapers preferred. Worst case scenario, in

a few hours Atlanta would receive a call from a disembodied voice demanding X amount for Royce's safe return. Maybe they'd send Atlanta a finger or an ear first, just to set the ground rules. If he worked for the Germans, or the French, or the Italians, there'd be no question about whether they'd cough up the ransom. American companies were more unpredictable. Next time, he'd definitely go with the Italians, just to be on the safe side.

Too much champagne, I'm fine, everything is fine. Full speed ahead, Royce, old bean. Kick the door shut. There's a boy.

Finally, he made it to the bed and sprawled on his back. He pawed at the phone in his pants pocket, unaware of who he might call at this late hour, who might gallop to his rescue, if not the police, and he knew from a thousand dirty deals the police were never to be trusted, but all feeling leaked from his fingers and a few moments later he fell unconscious.

Somewhere in the void of night Shelley Jackson crept into his bed. He jerked awake and shoved her to the floor in a moment of stark terror, his brain confused as to whether this was another nightmare, a hallucination fueled by his earlier kamikaze excesses. Shelley Jackson laughed crazily. A tendril of blood leaked from her nostril. The blue and red running lights of a low-flying helicopter traveled across the room, briefly illuminating the wildness of her expression, her feral, inhuman beauty.

Royce froze in a half-crouch upon the edge of the bed, now very much convinced this was the real deal for once, not a fever dream. A hundred thoughts crashed into each other, among them, *How the hell did she get in here?* He didn't have much of a chance to analyze the situation. As the light from the chopper dwindled, Shelley Jackson was blurred in the shadows and she sprang upon him, knocked him supine, twisting in his arms, wiry and ferocious. She ravished him with sloppy kisses and nipped his lips, his tongue. She tasted of liquor and blood and darkness. Her skin was damp and hot against his. Her hair was matted and tangled and smelled of animal sweat. She tore his clothes away and licked his chest and belly. As her frantic mouth sealed his cock and her tongue began to circle in tight, efficient strokes, he wondered whose bed she'd recently crawled from before tumbling into his. He came then and the thought was obliterated as he turned inside out.

Later, she straddled him, her sleek, powerful thighs locked against his hips, and rocked slowly, muscles shuddering, her teeth gleaming in the dark as she panted. Royce lay flattened and nearly lifeless from absolute exhaustion, yet his cock profoundly engorged as she took him in until his balls were tight against her ass. She groaned in Cantonese. Her palms ground into his chest and he winced, thinking dimly of the bruises sure to come. His gasp was cut short as she leaned down and clamped her hand over his mouth and nose and shut off his air. He bucked in pseudo orgasms, his hands prying at her wrist and forearm. No way could she maintain her grip; he thought this as fire turned his lungs to ash and black tracers shot through his brain.

Above the thunder in his ears a raucous, eager croaking resounded from the darkness and grew close. Half-formed shapes gathered around the bed, witness to his pathetic struggles. He glimpsed lank hair fanned across elongated breasts, and round paunches rugose as elephant hides. Withered lips fastened to his nipples, the span of his inner thigh. Mouths, toothless as hagfish, slobbered on him. He was dimly mortified and repulsed as his erection intensified and he came again so powerfully he thought his back might break.

He went deaf and blind and spun in clockwise revolutions, faster and faster until he was plunged down the drain into insoluble night.

“Black Weasel.”

“Huh?” Royce’s eyes were glued shut. Dull, cold light pressed against his lids. His mouth was dry and chapped. He’d curled into the fetal position; his entire body felt like it had been beaten with a club.

Shelley Jackson said, “I don’t think it’s black sloth. I think it’s black weasel hell. A Buddhist punishment.”

He covered his face with his arm. “Oh, boy. What?”

“You were raving.”

“Oh,” he said, and stuck his aching head under a pillow.

Shelley Jackson wouldn’t let up. She said, “What’s the worst predicament you’ve ever been in? Me, I got lost in Bangkok; drunk, drunk, drunk, don’t you know; separated from my friends who actually knew their way around

the goddamned rat warren. Some guys started following me, chased me into a really slummy part of town. The whole city is slummy, but this took the cake. Very spooky."

"But you made it." He licked his blistered lips, tried to clear the rust from his throat. The previous evening was becoming as distant and mysterious as the depths of the oubliette he'd once seen at a tourist castle in the Loire Valley. He had to piss in the worst way, yet his cock was so sore he dreaded the slightest movement. "You escaped their clutches."

"Did I?" Shelley Jackson's voice was scratchy. She snuggled her warm, solid weight against him, one leg flopped across his own. "All's well that ends well. I could be living in a bamboo box giving head to faceless sonsofbitches who pay for that sort of thing. I'm a lucky girl, then."

"White slavery isn't the trend. They probably wanted your kidneys."

"Not these sorry bastards, they don't. You weren't kidding when you said you were dry. I looked everywhere and nada. I need a drink."

Metal snicked and cigarette smoke coiled into Royce's nose. He moaned and held out his hand until she stuck the cigarette into his mouth for a long drag. He coughed hard enough his guts churned, but the nicotine rush began to do its magic straight away. Eventually he said, "I thought you didn't smoke." When no answer was forthcoming, he continued, "I'll tell you what I need. Coffee."

"Me too. Get up and make some."

They had coffee on the terrace; she in a set of his boxers and a white dress shirt; he wrapped in a towel. It was raining again. Gray clouds erased the city beyond the walls of the compound.

"How come you trashed your TV?"

Royce had to think on that. His TV? It came back to him then, how he'd been trying to find the news, but every channel was filled with either black static, or the repeating image of a chamber filled with dozens of screaming people. The latter was filmed at some distance so the actors were indistinct miniatures. The people screamed because they were strapped to tables, or slung from poles, or trapped inside small baskets. Torturers were quartering them with winches and chains, stabbing them with barbed prongs, or slowly

sawing them to pieces. And childlike figures cowered beneath the killing tables in the lakes of gore, bloated bellies like famine victims, and unnaturally slender necks—cranes' necks—and alabaster faces that shone with pure, ravenous horror. Channel after channel of this, and somewhere in the confusion the remote died and the images ran together, faster and faster, and the sounds—! He'd flown into a vicious rage and speared the monitor with one of the fancy plastic kitchen chairs. When was this? A week ago? Two? The little details kept slipping his mind.

Royce said, "Something on the news pissed me off."

"You crazy, Hawthorne? That's it, I bet." She eyed him over her cigarette. "And what the fuck is up with the wig? Ashamed of the ol' bald spot? Overkill."

"Guess I'm a diva at heart."

"Yeah, okay. So. What's yours?"

"My what?"

"Predicament. The worst fix you've ever been in."

"Most people would ask what's the worst thing you've ever done, or what's the worst thing that's ever happened to you…"

"Yeah, but I didn't. Pay attention, fool."

"I got locked in a trunk. Russian mobsters. A bunch of amateur slobs. They were just trying to scare me off a job at a munitions factory, but damn." Royce enjoyed the lie because it came so naturally and was so close to the ugly truth of his profession. He *had* worked at a Russian factory, and if they'd ever caught him spying he imagined they'd have done something drastic, probably far worse than scare him. Yet, even as the lie rolled from his tongue, the brutal peasant faces of his imaginary captors, the suffocating darkness of the trunk, his terror and panic and despair were solid as memories ever got. A black gulf opened in his mind's eye and he shivered and looked away.

"Holy crap. Did it work? They scare you off the job?"

"Hell yes." Royce dragged on the cigarette and blew a rolling cloud of smoke. "Hell, yes."

“That’s good stuff, Hawthorne. I ain’t ever met anybody who’d been kidnapped by Russkies. You spies live on the edge, doncha?”

There it was, game over. He wondered how it’d happened and discarded the thought. It didn’t matter, did it? He turned his face to stone, ticking off the possibilities, the likely outcomes, the avenues of escape. “Excuse me?”

“Lighten up, boy. You’ve got telescopes and cameras up the wazoo… Either you’re a perv, which I bet is incidental, or you’re keeping tabs on somebody here at the LRA. Besides, I’ve done a little checking on you; you got a lot of free time for a QA.”

“I’m a hobbyist,” he said, his heart beating double time. “Majored in film back in the day. Been thinking of shooting a documentary about voyeurism.”

“Bullshit. But it’s okay if you’ve got secrets. It’s sexy in a creepy way.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“No problem, eagle eyes. So, since you mentioned it, what’s the worst thing you’ve ever done. And I don’t mean spying on broads in their undies. I mean the worst.”

“Be prepared for disappointment. I’ve lived a blameless, pedestrian life. Besides getting stuffed in the trunk, of course.”

“Now you’re boring me,” she said. She stubbed her cigarette and hugged her knees as the wind came up and rattled the loose bars in the rail. “Wanna know why I decided to come over here? Wanna know what changed my mind?”

Royce shook his head. “Don’t jinx it.”

“But c’mon—be honest. Isn’t all this a bit much? Isn’t it kind of unreal? That’s what I said when I woke up and saw you half-dead next to me. I said, ‘Shell, what kind of freaky shit were you drinking last night, girl?’ Admit it. You thought the same thing, except yours was probably more like, ‘Fuck yeah! I’m the stallion!’ Right?”

His mind filled with pink and black clouds. He said, “I better get dressed. Big day at the factory.”

After Royce didn’t see Shelley Jackson for a couple days he checked with his sources and discovered she’d gone to Beijing with James for a

multinational trade conference and tour of manufacturing provinces, which meant a week or so of morning confabs and afternoons and evenings of drunken debauchery; fully comped, naturally.

Royce broke into her apartment in the middle of the afternoon when activity in the compound was at its ebb. He told himself the trespass wasn't premeditated—he'd come home from work early and paced around the kitchen with caged nervousness, his head throbbing from squinting through the telescope at the same humdrum activity that was a mirror of the past several months. That didn't wash, though; he'd lifted her keys while she snoozed after their second evening of anguished screwing and made copies with a key-mold he stashed in a locked drawer. On the other hand, he'd barely made the conscious decision to do the deed when he found himself before the door as if in a dream or nightmare wherein the sequence of events conforms to the need of the story. The scenes just merged.

You've gone round the bend, pal o' mine. For Chrissake, just walk away. This isn't the silly shit you pulled in college when you were young and dumb and a little obsessive-compulsive behavior was a forgivable side effect of hormones and a lack of judgment. What the fuck do you think you're doing?

The proceedings continued to unravel with the dreamlike quality. He couldn't shake the stupor that descended upon him, that rendered him a helpless observer to his moving hands.

In this dream that was not a dream, Royce peeled yellow caution tape from the threshold; the tape had gone waxy and brittle with age. How could her unit be sealed when he saw her moving around in there so many nights over the recent months? He hesitated to turn the knob, nearly paralyzed by the utter certainty he'd be sorry in the end for this ill-conceived intrusion. *Maybe Jenny was right—you're nothing more than a stalker, justify it anyway you want*. His hands followed their own agenda and pushed open the door. *You'll regret it. Wait and see! Your dick gets you in trouble every time*. But it was too late, he'd ignored the appeals of his better angels and set the machinery in motion. He'd succumbed to curiosity, jealousy and let the dream be his insulation from blame.

It was worse than he'd imagined. Shelley Jackson's unit reeked of carpet vinyl burned to slag, and a richer, headier undercurrent of cooked blood. The apartment was a series of connected boxes, each charred and ruined. A futile cascade of the sprinkler system had burst plumbing and devastated the enclosure beyond even the scope of the fire. Bits of plaster and melted wiring dangled from the ruptured ceilings; water dripped from exposed pipes. He gaped dumbfounded at a half-dozen sides of beef suspended by thick ropes. The slaughtered meat was wrapped in translucent plastic that mitigated the rank decay, muffled the buzz and whine of flies at work. Blood had dripped until it formed a small lake of black pudding. A partially skinned cow head remained attached to one carcass, a grotesquerie of flattened muzzle and bulging eye. Royce tapped the bovine eyeball through its plastic shroud, found it to be as unyielding as a knot of hard leather.

I was in a slaughterhouse once. When was that? Was I really? Oh, yes. You were thirteen, remember? Cousin Tobe's farm; he showed you the old barn where they killed the cows. Tobe's family hadn't used it, not in years. Didn't matter, you held the hammer, saw the chains and the hooks, you practically heard those cow ghosts bawling as they were strung up. What an imagination you've got there, son.

Royce fumbled for the tiny camera he'd dropped into his pocket and clicked an entire memory card of photographic evidence. He poked about the room, snapping his shots and wondering at the absurdity of it all. The dreamlike flow of continuity compelled him to open a cabinet wherein he found a metal box with the paint stripped from intense heat. Inside were a number of half-melted identification cards and blackened passports, each bearing Shelly Jackson's face, but with radically different names and hairstyles. The pictures and passports went into his jacket after a bit.

Someone grunted in another room, followed by a drawn out ripping sound and he almost jumped from his skin. Slivers and shards of imploded light bulbs gleamed amid the crystallized lumps of linoleum, the heaps of scorched furniture. The floor creaked uneasily beneath his cautious tread. The curtains of plastic broke the fading light into fragments and did nothing to illuminate the dim corners, the gaping holes in sheetrock that burrowed into deeper darkness.

He peeked around the doorjamb into the shelled remnants of the bedroom, driven by the sickly fascination of a child spying for the first time upon his parents coupling. The bed was destroyed except for its brass frame. Mrs. Ward squatted inside the frame. She was naked as a fish. Her blubber seemed magnified in the bluish-tinted light, a crippling excess. Yet beneath this excess were sheets of muscle that belied terrible strength and contributed to the overall impression of unnaturalness and perversion. A grimy burlap sack rested at her feet. It was easily the length of a sleeping bag, only wider, and if Saint Nick had butchered reindeer this was exactly the kind of bag he'd carry.

Mrs. Tuttle, Mrs. Yarbro and Mrs. Coyne sat around her in lotus fashion, and they too were naked. They gleamed like ivory totems and in contrast to the inimitable Mrs. Ward, each seemed absolutely cadaverous with sunken chests and exposed ribs, the skeletal grimaces of cancer patients on the last leg of the journey. The women feasted on the leathery remains of a haunch of cow. Their hollow faces were caked in old blood. Gnawed bones lay heaped all about the room. Mrs. Tuttle gouged a hunk of meat free with long and tapered fingers and tenderly fed Mrs. Ward. Mrs. Yarbro and Mrs. Coyne rocked wildly and uttered joyful croaks that were far removed from humanity.

Royce swayed in place as the world splintered beneath his feet. As one, the four women raised their bloody faces to regard him and he thought of primates, of the hominids in their caves, an awful feast spread across rocks and dirt. Mrs. Ward's mouth yawned in evident pleasure at his appearance. She made a glottal exclamation and raised her hand to point. Mrs. Coyne, Tuttle and Yarbro cackled and scattered. Mrs. Coyne hesitated in the wreckage of the wall of the bathroom to titter at Royce. She leaped straight up into a crack in the ceiling and vanished.

Mrs. Ward patted the filthy, lumpy sack without looking away from him. "Some of your friends are waiting." She levered herself into a crouch, oriented as if to spring. Her neck swelled.

Pitch flowed across the windows, like heavy satin curtains dropping on an opera stage, and all light was extinguished. Royce fell sideways, capsized in the blackness and struck his hip and shoulder on the door jamb, drove a jag of glass into his calf. He threw his hands before his face in an instinctive

gesture and the darkness peeled from the windows, revealed the burned room. Mrs. Ward was gone. He was alone, kneeling amid the ashes, an unwilling supplicant.

His perception of the known world, which had taken a number of blows lately, slid a little further into terra incognita. He approached the day manager and asked how the LRA could let a burned out unit to someone. The guy looked at him quizzically and said the appropriate repairs had been affected and approved by the building authorities, but if the kind sir was concerned regarding the issue he might broach the matter with Superintendent Harris. Royce was left with soot smudges on his fingers, the acrid cloy of cinders in his hair and a deepening sense of dislocation. He fled to the Rover, hungry for the presence of familiar surroundings, the comfort of a crowd. He drank himself senseless and someone called Coyne who came and dragged him home.

Royce emerged from his coma the following afternoon. His skull was filled with the familiar pink and black cloud and he told himself his visit to Shelley Jackson's apartment had been a dream, the worst kind. Deciding it had been a dream instantly made him feel one hundred percent better. He thought about going back over, just to verify that the universe was whole and sane. Instead he poured himself a tall glass of XO and watched his neighbors walk around the quadrangle, flitter like shadows behind the windows of their apartments.

Mr. Shea flagged down Royce as he left the office on a Friday evening and invited him to a private get-together he was throwing the next afternoon. The occasion was informal; there'd be free food and liquor. "We'll probably bore the shit out of you. You look mopey, is all," Mr. Shea said. "I hope you aren't letting some broad get you down."

Royce laughed, but there was no question he'd been mooning like a lovesick teenager. His productivity at the cover job was taking a hit; on the spy front he'd all but abandoned his mission, preferring to vegetate on his couch waiting for the girl to return. Two weeks and no sign of Shelley Jackson. It was like the old line: she doesn't call, she doesn't write, oy…

In fairness, she might've called once, at about four am. The connection was full of static and her voice sounded like it was coming through crumpling

paper. *I fucked you because you look exactly like a guy I knew in college. I worked in a hospice and this younger dude was dying of cancer or something, he was mostly gone. A sack of bones; smelled like he was rotting. Couldn't talk much, in and out of reality, but really nice. His mom left some photos on the dresser. Him and his family. Him playing catch with a dog. Him and his girlfriend at the prom. He'd been a handsome guy. I couldn't get over how much his girlfriend and I looked alike, either; we could've been sisters. It was weird. At least I thought so until I met you and it sank in who you reminded me of—crap, that's pretty twisted, I know. Anyway, I'll show you the prom picture when I get back. Yeah, yeah, I stole it when the kid died. Dunno why. Nobody ever said anything. Later!*

Royce had shouted into the phone, tried to interrupt her rambling monologue. She couldn't hear him and just kept talking about this dying kid and his high school sweetheart and then static swept her voice away. He couldn't be certain what was real. There was no record of the call on his line and in the light of day the conversation seemed increasingly implausible. *She's on vacation. Traveling, I dunno where,* according to an increasingly bellicose Mr. James when hectored on the matter. Royce, clinging to some tiny shred of pride, swallowed his frustration and obsessed in private. He couldn't fathom his overwhelming compulsion to rut with her, a need so singularly powerful stray memories of her breasts as they gleamed with perspiration, the wicked O of her mouth as she teased the head of his cock, caused him to stiffen at the most awkward moments at work. He made certain to carry a clipboard at all times for strategic positioning. Good God, it was life at fourteen all over again.

Mr. Shea said, "Be there, two pm. Bring that Coyne fellow. You haven't given up on him, have you? Good, bring him along. Maybe he'll loosen up a bit."

Royce reluctantly agreed to the daytrip, despite the fact he'd have been happy to spend the weekend as a shut-in. He arranged for Mr. Jen to swing by the LRA and squire Coyne and himself to the rendezvous—a seaside resort at the edge of the New Territories. It proved to be a gloomy ride. Coyne, who at the outset seemed overjoyed by the opportunity to schmooze with the fat cats, became absorbed with his handheld computer and cell phone. Mr. Jen drove in stoic silence for the entire forty-minute ride. He

didn’t even utter a word when a flatbed truck loaded with lumber cut them off on a sharp curve, forcing him to pump the breaks and twist the wheel hard to slide their vehicle between two cars in the slow lane. Royce clung to his armrest, wondering how the driver could wedge them in the crease so tightly without trading paint. Coyne retrieved his phone from the floorboard and laughed at Royce and patted his leg before resuming conversation with whomever was on the other end.

Mr. Jen’s eyes were flat and black in the rearview mirror.

Once they passed the city outskirts and climbed through densely wooded hills, traffic thinned. They shared the winding highway with tractor trailers, buses and a very few private vehicles. Eventually the road descended and paralleled the water. The mountains rose green and mysterious on the right. Mangroves spread across the wetlands far out to the distant tidal flats.

The resort wasn’t much—a batch of outdated brown and white buildings atop a low bluff overlooking a rough beach. It appeared to be the off season, not that Royce could be certain; he seldom surfaced from the microcosm of his secret world to mark the seasons, the holidays, or nearly anything related to real life. Placid tourists in garish flower-print shirts wandered the grounds in singles and pairs. There was a collection of architecturally uninspired fountains, rock gardens and topiary quartered by gravel paths. A lone souvenir shop remained open. Most of the other windows were dark.

Mr. Jen parked alongside a nondescript sedan near the hub. The hub was the largest of the buildings, a former western-style house remodeled as a hotel. Its cantilever roofs were covered in moss, its many terraces dripped red and green and blotches of yellow and violet. The big man silently escorted Royce and Coyne into the foyer. The concierge was young and thin and supremely diffident. Upon their arrival, the man exchanged words with Jen in a dialect peculiar to Royce’s ear. The concierge barked over his shoulder and clapped impatiently. A pale girl in the brown and white resort uniform emerged from a back room. She bowed and beckoned. She led them through an arch flanked by bronzes of regal mandarins and down a hall into a kind of ovular lounge encircled by bay windows. A rain squall tapped the skylights.

Twenty or so men congregated in small groups about the lounge, smoking and sipping expensive liquor and chatting in a loud, bluff manner that suggested most of them were well into the sauce. Royce recognized a few from the central office, a couple more from the management at the factories. The rest were strangers. He got the impression from snippets of conversation a lot of them had flown in from parts unknown and were taking a pit stop to enjoy the hospitality of their fellow overseers. The guests were uniformly white and male; it was the unwritten code these types of parties were part of the grand old gentleman's tradition. Women and minorities might be invited as curiosities, but such was rare. His collar felt tight and he'd started sweating. He always forgot how sick he was of these affairs until the latest one rolled around.

Mr. James and Mr. Shea waited, drinks in hand at the wet bar. An ornate floor lamp glowed ruddily several feet away near a coffee table loaded with sandwiches, the kind sliced into neat triangles transfixed by a toothpick, and gourmet crackers and a tea service. Large pieces of mismatched furniture had been cast about the room, legacy of the vision of multiple designers, each making additions without heed for style or continuity. It hurt Royce's eyes. He put on a jovial smile and shook hands and accepted a generous scotch dealt by a dour bartender who might've been the elder brother of the concierge.

Mr. Shea grinned affably at Royce. "Glad you made the scene, old man. I wasn't sure I could snap you out of your little funk."

Mr. James said, "It's damned silly to pine over a broad! Who needs them, says I, three divorces later. We're like four amigos; us against the world, eh?" His broad, heavy face was red as brick from drinking. He behaved as a man who'd become so accustomed to perpetual intoxication he'd developed immunity to its lesser effects, a snake handler's tolerance for venom.

"We're like pigs in a blanket," Mr. Shea said. "We're positively cozy. Hit me again, Wang." He traded his empty to the bartender for a fresh glass. "Except for that fellow. Who's he?" He pointed to Mr. Jen. Mr. Jen stood implacably near the door. "I don't like him, I fear."

"That's Mr. Jen. He's my driver," Royce said.

“Ease up on the booze, man,” Mr. James said. “He’s Hawthorne’s driver. Personnel gives all our main men drivers.”

“They do? What a cash sink. You’re practically stealing our money then, aren’t you, Hawthorne?”

“Shut it, Miguel. You want these guys to drive themselves?”

“Go on, Mr. Jen. Shoo, shoo!” Mr. Shea flapped his hand until Mr. Jen wheeled and silently stepped out of the room. “All right. I feel much better. Oh, Wang, you get lost too, yeah? Just leave the bottle handy, will you?”

The bartender grimaced and flung his apron on the counter. He gave them a wondering look and stomped after Mr. Jen.

“Hungry? Let’s eat!” Mr. Shea went for the sandwiches and Mr. James magnanimously waived Coyne and Royce to the table ahead of himself. “Bloody excellent, I must say. Bloody excellent,” Mr. Shea said before he wiped his fingers on one of the fancy cloth napkins.

“It’s great,” Coyne said. His head was on a swivel, taking in the sights and sounds. He seemed in his element.

“Hip-hip-hooray,” Mr. James intoned. He laughed at his own impression and ate another sandwich. “Miguel, we need to hire the bugger who catered this. These bloody things are bloody divine!”

Royce watched Coyne from the corner of his eye. His own stomach was tied in knots. None of the other guests, the blowhard captains of industry, intruded upon them. It was like an invisible barrier had sprung up. The executives continued to drink and exchange their coarse inanities, dutifully blind. He also noticed two hard-looking men in pea coats had melted into the room, casually situated between everyone and the door to the foyer. They waited patiently, a pair of hunting dogs on the leash. His picture of Mr. James and Mr. Shea underwent an unwelcome sea change in that instant. He took another drink. The crumbling façade was a palpable thing.

Why are we here? In his guts, he knew the answer. Mr. James and Mr. Shea managed to get the goods on Coyne and intended to announce the truth. Coyne would be apprehended and Royce informed his services were no longer required, and so on. His performance had been so sloppy, so inarguably negligent, he stood to receive a reprimand from Atlanta when

they finally discovered the facts of this debacle. *You'll never work in this town again!* If this had been that insane game show with the lunatic cowboy, all the bells and lights and streamers would've announced his most telling deduction. *So what's the prize?*

"Grab your drinks, boys. I'll give you the tour. You've got to see the cavaedium…" Mr. James heaved to his feet and beckoned them as he headed for one of the side passages.

"Oh, goodie!" Coyne said with only a modicum of sarcasm, which Royce had learned was a benign affectation intended to impress superiors and potential lovers.

Mr. Shea half covered his mouth and said to Royce *sotto voce*, "Don't act too impressed. It's just an atrium and it's roughly as shitty as the rest of this place."

Royce lighted a cigarette, unsure whether to be depressed or relieved that this assignment was about to enter the books in the loss column. He handed the cigarette to Coyne and lighted another for himself, then rose to follow Mr. James and Mr. Shea. The group meandered through a series of dim, unrefined corridors decorated with ubiquitous potted ferns and bland still-life prints and lifeless seascapes. Anonymous doors shut off what Royce guessed to be dark, empty spaces.

The atrium was mundane as Mr. Shea promised. Rain sizzled on cracked and worn tiles of the concave floor and collected in a puddle. Gnats hummed in Royce's ears, bit his neck. He tried to stay dry by standing in the shadows of the marble columns.

Mr. James said to Coyne, "This land was once owned by a Canadian whose family did quite well in textiles. A Japanese consortium acquired the facilities in, what was it? Ninety-five, ninety-six—?"

"Ninety-six," Mr. Shea said. "The Yakuza bought the deed. God knows what went on in the back rooms, eh?" He made slicing motions with his hand.

"It was not the fucking Yakuza," Mr. James said. "The Yakuza operate in Japan, anyway. It was a group of Japs from Okinawa."

"This looks like a nice place for second tier entertaining," Coyne said.

“Exactly!” Mr. James jabbed with his cigar. “One of our clients gets rowdy, it cleans up easy enough—”

“And nobody stays in the hotel in the winter, so you could scream your lungs out if you wanted,” Mr. Shea said.

Mr. James led them past the atrium and along a covered walk. The walk let into a garden. The garden contained a sand pit and shrubbery, a Koi pond and some marble benches. Wood slats bobbed in the pond and Royce thought it must be a fish trap for the Koi. Bamboo closed off three sides of the area, and beyond that were dim contours of a wall. The group halted at the edge of the garden under an eave.

“Hawthorne, I want to commend you,” Mr. James said. “I’d been under the impression you were squandering our time and money on this snipe hunt of yours—”

“Yeah, we thought you came for the whores and the liquor and free rent!” Mr. Shea said, and laughed. “Sorry, pal. Don’t hold it against us, we get freeloaders and bums galore in this biz. I’m sure you understand.”

Royce wasn’t certain he understood anything. He glanced at Coyne, couldn’t gauge the man’s reaction. “Right,” he said.

“But look, Hawthorne. Pointing us to the woman… that was brilliant. And subtle,” Mr. Shea said.

“Almost *too* subtle,” Mr. James said.

“Yes, almost too subtle,” Mr. Shea said. “You could’ve been a bit more direct. Nonetheless, who are we to question the methods of a consummate professional such as yourself?”

“Quite right.” Mr. James tossed his empty glass into the bushes.

Coyne looked from face to face. His was the expression of a man who’d missed the punch line of a joke. “Royce, what’s this he’s saying?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Royce said. His smile was a blank as he tried to get a handle on what the hell was happening here. He automatically stepped slightly away from Mr. James and Mr. Shea and tried to locate the goons lurking somewhere behind them.

“What’s that?” Coyne stepped into the garden and focused on the pond. Slapping and snorting came from the water and the pieces of wood wobbled

side to side.

"You are one smooth operator," Mr. Shea said to Royce. "We haven't figured out how the CIA let her sneak off the reservation—"

"Oh, but we will," Mr. James said. "And we're going to see who's been feeding her information." He glanced meaningfully at Coyne's back. Coyne had walked to the pond and was standing at the edge, staring into the water. "She's just the mule. We still need the traitor who ripped us off in the first place."

"Look at this bullshit." Mr. Shea passed Royce a handful of government-issue identification cards. The cards were partially melted, their lettering and photographic portraits distorted by bubbling and scorch marks. Royce instantly knew them. "The broad's like Lon Chaney. She's got a name and look for every occasion. CIA cut her loose six years ago and she's been freelancing ever since, near as we can figure. She went to the dark side."

"One of our people in Taiwan was able to put the finger on her, too. Treacherous bitch." Mr. James' bloody eyes seemed to distend with the force of his anger.

Royce pretended to study the pictures on the cards and tried to compute, to wrestle the implications. He felt strangely weightless after only the one drink. The pink and black fog seeped into his thoughts. It was never far away these days.

They were in a little metal box nearly ruined by fire. Where did I put the box? In the safe. Are you sure? Yeah, I'm sure. For the life of him, for the sake of his sanity, he couldn't dredge up any recollection of handing the evidence, such as it was, over to Mr. Shea or Mr. James. *Get a grip, Hawthorne—you think you've got a split personality? You think your evil twin dropped the dime on her and left you in the dark? You aren't the Manchurian Candidate. They broke into your place and heisted the box. There's your answer to the mystery. When's the last time you even checked?* But he'd checked last night, hadn't he? He'd awakened from tossing and dreaming of Shelley Jackson's supple body opening for him, and retrieved the sooty box from his safe and spread all her pieces of false ID on his bed. How long had he feverishly arranged and rearranged those cards, trying to assemble the puzzle? Nobody had stolen into his room. Nothing so simple

was at play here. *Is this how it feels to go off the deep end? Ah, come off it—you've been total whack for a while*.

Coyne screamed and startled everyone. He lurched from the pool, cast a terrified look at Royce and ran headlong into the bushes. Saplings whapped and shook with his passage. He clambered over the wall and was gone.

"Where does he think he's going?" Mr. James said to Mr. Shea.

Mr. Shea shrugged and sipped his drink. "Boy's got a guilty conscience."

The cards dropped from Royce's fingers. He walked along the path to the Koi pond and its ominous splashing; the commotion of too many fish in a confined space. There were no Koi in the shallow pond, but instead a rectangular cage of woven bamboo. A body trapped in the coffin-shaped cage was completely submerged except for an oval of mouth and nose. The splashes were caused by the person struggling to arch his or her back in order to keep breathing. The person's skin was withered and gray and beginning to slough, rendering their features unrecognizable.

"She'll tell all," Mr. Shea called with raucous good humor.

Royce wanted to sit. He tried to speak, to formulate a question, a protest, anything. Bubbles foamed over the person's face as they gasped and thrashed.

"You should lie down," Mr. Shea said in his ear.

"Rest a while. You're nearly finished," Mr. James said in his other ear.

How can anybody move so fast? Royce began to turn and then they pulled a hood over his eyes.

Rain clouds rolled back as daylight ebbed. Royce didn't know how long he'd been staring out the window at the panoptic expanse of twilit countryside. The car purred, leaving the ocean and the mangrove thickets below, following the road into the foothills, returning to the distant city. Highway lights flickered to life.

Mr. Jen drove. His black suit and sallow flesh were grainy-blue with shadow. He watched Royce in the rearview mirror more than he appeared to watch the road.

"You in on it?" Royce said, resting his cheek against the window. The ocean slid away while the subtropical forest closed, its green wall holding

back a great darkness. “You in it, Jen? You in on it?” He didn’t really care if Mr. Jen was in on the vast conspiracy against the sanity of one Royce Hawthorne.

Mr. Jen stared at Royce. He didn’t glance from the mirror even as the car tracked around a sharp corner and a truck rushed past them in the opposite lane with a horn blare and the clang of a trailer jouncing on pavement.

Royce laughed and hunted in his pockets until he recovered his cigarettes. He lighted the last one. “Yeah, you’re in on it, all right.”

Chu said, “Stupid Yankee.” He’d come from nowhere to share the backseat. “Do you have any idea how long it lasts?” He cuffed Royce. “Do you have any idea?”

“No,” Royce said, shrinking away.

“Idiot. Fool. That’s why they call it the Drink of Forgetfulness. Still, the wheel goes round and round, my Yankee friend. Forgetfulness wears thin and atonement must follow. They’ve a chamber for every trespass, you see.”

“Eighteen,” Royce said. “Eighteen.”

“I was in the Chamber of Wind and Thunder for seven lifetimes. And now I’m here and I can’t say which is worse—the injury or the insult.”

“I’m dead.” There was the answer, elegant in its simplicity. Royce drew on his cigarette and nodded in morbid celebration. “Or I’m comatose in a country hospital and this is a hallucination. You aren’t even real, Chu.”

Chu cackled and the fine bones of his face lent him an aspect of profound cruelty. There was a stiletto in his hand like magic and he stabbed Royce in the arm. “Do you feel dead, you fucking moron?” he said to Royce’s cry of anguish. “Don’t you get it? Everybody lives in hell.”

Royce clutched his arm, knew even as the blood seeped into the crook ofhis elbow, the wound was minor, which helped, although not much. Chu seemed happy enough with the result. He made the knife disappear and looked away, out the window into the forest.

Just ahead, a steep grade carried the road into the mouth of a tunnel. The car zoomed in and the world went black. The only illumination was the red glow from Royce’s cigarette where it warmed the window glass. The car

stopped without braking, without any sense of deceleration whatsoever, and hung in weightless space.

And he was in his apartment, seated before the destroyed TV with the blue light of evening coming through the window, soft as a cloud. The power was down and it would be dark soon.

He finished his cigarette, took his sweet time, and when it was done he went into the silent hall and walked down the stairs and crossed the quadrangle. A group of kids ran in circles at the opposite end, shrieking and laughing and rehearsing their eventual death scenes. The pool man leaned over the water, fishing for leaves and dung with his net. He watched Royce go. There were more children in the far stairwell; they hid in the corners and the space beneath the stairs and their overlarge heads wagged on straw necks and they clutched bellies swollen with hunger. He knew the ravenous ghosts had no business with him and ignored the croaks and groans, the restless snick of claws on cement, the strangled click of saliva in constricted throats.

Coyne's door was open.

"Hello, Aunt CJ," Royce said, standing at the threshold. He dug his fingers into the frame, half-expecting the world to tilt and drop him into an abyss of starry sky.

"Is that who you see when you gaze upon me?" Mrs. Ward said. "How tragically ordinary." She swung her bone-white face back to Coyne's body, which lay supine and still, and continued to roll him into a ball and stuff him into her filthy burlap sack. Coyne seemed rubbery, deflated, little more than a sack himself. But his mouth worked soundlessly, his eyes were wet and it was possible he saw Royce there in the doorway.

"Who are you?" Royce said, so quietly it was almost a thought.

"I'm your Aunt Carole Joyce, dear."

"The hell you say."

She wheezed and shoved the top of Coyne's head until he disappeared completely into the sack. She bound the neck of the sack in barbed wire and grinned up at Royce, licking her bloody fingers. Darkness filled the room and her white face seemed to float. "We're caretakers. Who are *you*, love?"

He wiped tears from his cheeks, unable to meet her gaze. Her cold hand caressed his shoulder, guided him into the hall. The white iron doors were there: the Chamber of Pounding; the Chamber of Fire; the Chamber of Blood; and the rest. When they came to *his* door he saw what the doorplate said, the judgment rendered of him, and hung his head. Mr. Jen stepped out of a recess in the wall and held the door. His eyes glittered like the carapace of a beetle.

Mrs. Ward squeezed Royce's shoulder. "There are far worse. The Chamber of Black Sloth, for one. Have courage. Everyone comes to this house."

Royce saw flashes of the beast in its cube, the man climbing the mountain of knives, the sawing and the blood, a mob of children with thin necks and fat bellies crawling along the shore of bubbling lakes of tar, and wept.

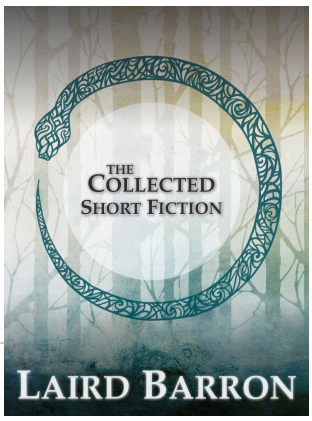
His chamber was circular and windowless. Tiers of benches ascended in the architectural style of an amphitheater. A large projection screen was centered upon the far wall. Mrs. Ward helped him to his seat of honor and her hand fell from his shoulder as she rejoined the rising darkness. The last of the light drained away and it grew cold.

Whispers and small rustlings circulated as the screen glowed faintly and reflected the patina of a scarred lens. Numbers reversed toward the beginning. So many numbers, so many beginnings, his heart became wooden in his chest.

From nearby, Shelley Jackson said, "These are your lives, Royce Hawthorne."

Royce tried to smile through tears, but it cracked to pieces and he shook as grief and sorrow claimed him. The images on the screen blurred, became incomprehensible, and that was a small blessing. "I understand now," he said. He inhaled and pushed his thumbs deep into the corners of his eyes, and pulled.

The Forest



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After the drive had grown long and monotonous, Partridge shut his eyes and the woman was waiting. She wore a cold white mask similar to the mask Bengali woodcutters donned when they ventured into the mangrove forests along the coast. The tigers of the forest were stealthy. The tigers hated to be watched; they preferred to sneak up on prey from behind, so natives wore the masks on the backs of their heads as they gathered wood. Sometimes this kept the tigers from dragging them away.

The woman in the cold white mask reached into a wooden box. She lifted a tarantula from the box and held it to her breast like a black carnation. The contrast was as magnificent as a stark Monet if Monet had painted watercolors of emaciated patricians and their pet spiders.

Partridge sat on his high, wooden chair and whimpered in animal terror. In the daydream, he was always very young and powerless. The woman tilted her head. She came near and extended the tarantula in her long, gray hand. “For you,” she said. Sometimes she carried herself more like Father and said in a voice of gravel, “Here is the end of fear.” Sometimes the tarantula was a hissing cockroach of prehistoric girth, or a horned beetle. Sometimes it was a strange, dark flower. Sometimes it was an embryo uncurling to form a miniature adult human that grinned a monkey’s hateful grin.

The woman offered him a black phone. The woman said, “Come say goodbye and good luck. Come quick!” Except the woman did not speak. Toshi’s breathless voice bled through the receiver. The woman in the cold white mask brightened then dimmed like a dying coal or a piece of metal coiling into itself.

Partridge opened his eyes and rested his brow against window glass. He was alone with the driver. The bus trawled through a night forest. Black trees dripped with fog. The narrow black road crumbled from decades of neglect. Sometimes poor houses and fences stood among the weeds and the ferns and mutely suggested many more were lost in the dark. Wilderness had arisen to reclaim its possessions.

Royals hunted in woods like these. He snapped on the overhead lamp and then opened his briefcase. *Stags, wild boar, witches. Convicts.* The briefcase was nearly empty. He had tossed in some traveler's checks, a paperback novel and his address book. No cell phone, although he left a note for his lawyer and a recorded message at Kyla's place in Malibu warning them it might be a few days, perhaps a week, that there probably was not even phone service where he was going. Carry on, carry on. He had hopped a redeye jet to Boston and once there eschewed the convenience of renting a car or hiring a chauffeur and limo. He chose instead the relative anonymity of mass transit. The appeal of traveling incognito overwhelmed his normally staid sensibilities. Here was the first adventure he had undertaken in ages. The solitude presented an opportunity to compose his thoughts—his excuses, more likely.

He'd cheerfully abandoned the usual host of unresolved items and potential brushfires that went with the territory—a possible trip to the Andes if a certain Famous Director's film got green-lighted and if the Famous Director's drunken assertion to assorted executive producers and hangers-on over barbecued ribs and flaming daiquiris at the Monarch Grille that Richard Jefferson Partridge was the only man for the job meant a blessed thing. There were several smaller opportunities, namely an L.A. documentary about a powerhouse high school basketball team that recently graced the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, unless the documentary guy, a Cannes Film Festival sweetheart, decided to try to bring down the governor of California instead, as he had threatened to do time and again, a pet crusade of his with the elections coming that fall, and then the director would surely use his politically savvy compatriot, the cinematographer from France. He'd also been approached regarding a proposed documentary about prisoners and guards at San Quentin. Certainly there were other,

lesser engagements he'd lost track of, these doubtless scribbled on memo pads in his home office.

He knew he should hire a reliable secretary. He promised himself to do just that every year. It was hard. He missed Jean. She'd had a lazy eye and a droll wit; made bad coffee and kept sand-filled frogs and fake petunias on her desk. Jean left him for Universal Studios and then slammed into a reef in Maui learning to surf with her new boss. The idea of writing the want-ad, of sorting the applications and conducting the interviews and finally letting the new person, the stranger, sit where Jean had sat and handle his papers, summoned a mosquito's thrum in the bones behind Partridge's ear.

These details would surely keep despite what hysterics might come in the meanwhile. Better, much better, not to endure the buzzing and whining and the imprecations and demands that he return at once on pain of immediate career death, over a dicey relay. He had not packed a camera, either. He was on vacation. His mind would store what his eye could catch and that was all.

The light was poor. Partridge held the address book close to his face. He had scribbled the directions from margin to margin and drawn a crude map with arrows and lopsided boxes and jotted the initials of the principles: Dr. Toshi Ryoko; Dr. Howard Campbell; Beasley; and Nadine. Of course, Nadine—she snapped her fingers and here he came at a loyal trot. There were no mileposts on the road to confirm the impression that his destination was near. The weight in his belly sufficed. It was a fat stone grown from a pebble.

Partridge's instincts did not fail him. A few minutes before dawn, the forest receded and they entered Warrenburgh. Warrenburgh was a loveless hamlet of crabbed New England shop fronts and angular plank and shingle houses with tall, thin doors and oily windows. Streetlights glowed along Main Street with black gaps like a broken pearl necklace. The street itself was buckled and rutted by poorly tarred cracks that caused sections to cohere uneasily as interleaved ice floes. The sea loomed near and heavy and palpable beneath a layer of rolling gloom.

Partridge did not like what little he glimpsed of the surroundings. Long ago, his friend Toshi had resided in New Mexico and Southern California,

did his best work in Polynesia and the jungles of Central America. The doctor was a creature of warmth and light. *Rolling Stone* had characterized him as “a rock star among zoologists” and as the “Jacques Cousteau of the jungle,” the kind of man who hired mercenaries to guard him, performers to entertain his sun drenched villa, and filmmakers to document his exploits. This temperate landscape, so cool and provincial, so removed from Partridge’s experience of all things Toshi, seemed to herald a host of unwelcome revelations.

Beasley, longstanding attendant of the eccentric researcher, waited at the station. “Rich! At least you don’t look like the big asshole *Variety* says you are.” He nodded soberly and scooped Partridge up for a brief hug in his powerful arms. This was like being embraced by an earth mover. Beasley had played Australian rules football for a while after he left the Army and before he came to work for Toshi. His nose was squashed and his ears were cauliflowers. He was magnetic and striking as any character actor, nonetheless. “Hey, let me get that.” He set Partridge aside and grabbed the luggage the driver had dragged from the innards of the bus. He hoisted the suitcases into the bed of a ’56 Ford farm truck. The truck was museum quality. It was fire engine red with a dinky American flag on the antenna.

They rumbled inland. Rusty light gradually exposed counterchange shelves of empty fields and canted telephone poles strung together with thick, dipping old-fashioned cables. Ducks pelted from a hollow in the road. The ducks spread themselves in a wavering pattern against the sky.

“Been shooting?” Partridge indicated the .20 gauge softly clattering in the rack behind their heads.

“When T isn’t looking. Yeah, I roam the marshes a bit. You?”

“No.”

“Yah?”

“Not in ages. Things get in the way. Life, you know?”

“Oh, well, we’ll go out one day this week. Bag a mallard or two. Raise the dust.”

Partridge stared at the moving scenery. Toshi was disinterested in hunting and thought it generally a waste of energy. Nadine detested the sport

without reserve. He tasted brackish water, metallic from the canteen. The odor of gun oil and cigarette smoke was strong in the cab. The smell reminded him of hip waders, muddy clay banks and gnats in their biting millions among the reeds. “Okay. Thanks.”

“Forget it, man.”

They drove in silence until Beasley hooked left onto a dirt road that followed a ridge of brambles and oak trees. On the passenger side overgrown pastures dwindled into moiling vapors. The road was secured by a heavy iron gate with the usual complement of grimy warning signs. Beasley climbed out and unlocked the gate and swung it aside. Partridge realized that somehow this was the same ruggedly charismatic Beasley, plus a streak of gray in the beard and minus the spring-loaded tension and the whiskey musk. Beasley at peace was an enigma. Maybe he had quit the bottle for good this time around. The thought was not as comforting as it should have been. If this elemental truth—Beasley the chronic drunk, the lovable, but damaged brute—had ceased to hold, then what else lurked in the wings?

When they had begun to jounce along the washboard lane, Partridge said, “Did T get sick? Somebody—I think Frank Ledbetter—told me T had some heart problems. Angina.”

“Frankie… I haven’t seen him since forever. He still working for Boeing?”

“Lockheed-Martin.”

“Yah? Good ol’ L&M. Well, no business like war business,” Beasley said. “The old boy’s fine. Sure, things were in the shitter for a bit after New Guinea, but we all got over it. Water down the sluice.” Again, the knowing, sidelong glance. “Don’t worry so much. He misses you. Everybody does, man.”

Toshi’s farm was more of a compound lumped in the torso of a great, irregular field. The road terminated in a hard pack lot bordered by a sprawl of sheds and shacks, gutted chicken coops and labyrinthine hog pens fallen to ruin. The main house, a Queen Anne, dominated. The house was a full three stories of spires, gables, spinning iron weathercocks and acres of slate tiles. A monster of a house, yet somehow hunched upon itself. It was brooding and squat and low as a brick and timber mausoleum. The detached

garage seemed new. So too the tarp and plastic-sheeted nurseries, the electric fence that partitioned the back forty into quadrants and the military drab shortwave antenna array crowning the A-frame barn. No private security forces were in evidence, no British mercenaries with submachine guns on shoulder slings, nor packs of sleek, bullet-headed attack dogs cruising the property. The golden age had obviously passed into twilight.

"Behold the Moorehead Estate," Beasley said as he parked by slamming the brakes so the truck skidded sideways and its tires sent up a geyser of dirt. "Howard and Toshi bought it from the county about fifteen years ago—guess the original family died out, changed their names, whatever. Been here in one form or another since 1762. The original burned to the foundation in 1886, which is roughly when the town—Orren Towne, 'bout two miles west of here—dried up and blew away. As you can see, they made some progress fixing this place since then."

Partridge whistled as he eyed the setup. "Really, ah, cozy."

There were other cars scattered in the lot: a Bentley; a Nixon-era Cadillac; an archaic Land Rover that might have done a tour in the Sahara; a couple of battered pickup trucks and an Army surplus jeep. These told Partridge a thing or two, but not enough to surmise the number of guests or the nature of Toshi's interest in them. He had spotted the tail rotor of a helicopter poking from behind the barn.

Partridge did not recognize any of the half-a-dozen grizzled men loitering near the bunkhouse. Those would be the roustabouts and the techs. The men passed around steaming thermoses of coffee. They pretended not to watch him and Beasley unload the luggage.

"For God's sake, boy, why didn't you catch a plane?" Toshi called down from a perilously decrepit veranda. He was wiry and sallow and vitally ancient. He dressed in a bland short sleeve button-up shirt a couple of neck sizes too large and his ever present gypsy kerchief. He leaned way over the precarious railing and smoked a cigarette. His cigarettes were invariably Russian and came in tin boxes blazoned with hyperbolic full-color logos and garbled English mottos and blurbs such as "Prince of Peace! and "Yankee Flavor!"

"The Lear's in the shop." Partridge waved and headed for the porch.

“You don’t drive, either, eh?” Toshi flicked his hand impatiently. “Come on, then. Beasley—the Garden Room, please.”

Beasley escorted Partridge through the gloomy maze of cramped halls and groaning stairs. Everything was dark: from the cryptic hangings and oil paintings of Mooreheads long returned to dust, to the shiny walnut planks that squeaked and shifted everywhere underfoot.

Partridge was presented a key by the new housekeeper, Mrs. Grant. She was a brusque woman of formidable brawn and comport; perhaps Beasley’s mother in another life. Beasley informed him that “new” was a relative term as she had been in Campbell’s employ for the better portion of a decade. She had made the voyage from Orange County and brought along three maids and a gardener/handyman who was also her current lover.

The Garden Room was on the second floor of the east wing and carefully isolated from the more heavily trafficked byways. It was a modest, L-shaped room with a low, harshly textured ceiling, a coffin wardrobe carved from the heart of some extinct tree, a matching dresser and a diminutive brass bed that sagged ominously. The portrait of a solemn girl in a garden hat was centered amidst otherwise negative space across from the bed. Vases of fresh cut flowers were arranged on the windowsills. Someone had plugged in a rose-scented air freshener to subdue the abiding taint of wet plaster and rotting wood; mostly in vain. French doors let out to a balcony overlooking tumbledown stone walls of a lost garden and then a plain of waist-high grass gone the shade of wicker. The grass flowed into foothills. The foothills formed an indistinct line in the blue mist.

“Home away from home, eh?” Beasley said. He wrung his hands, out of place as a bear in the confined quarters. “Let’s see if those bastards left us any crumbs.”

Howard Campbell and Toshi were standing around the bottom of the stairs with a couple of other elder statesmen types—one, a bluff, aristocratic fellow with handlebar mustaches and fat hands, reclined in a hydraulic wheelchair. The second man was also a specimen of genteel extract, but clean-shaven and decked in a linen suit that had doubtless been the height

of ballroom fashion during Truman's watch. This fellow leaned heavily upon an ornate blackthorn cane. He occasionally pressed an oxygen mask over his mouth and nose and snuffled deeply. Both men stank of medicinal alcohol and shoe polish. A pair of bodyguards hovered nearby. The guards were physically powerful men in tight suit-jackets. Their nicked-up faces wore the perpetual scowls of peasant trustees.

Toshi lectured about a so-called supercolony of ants that stretched six thousand kilometers from the mountains of Northern Italy down along the coasts of France and into Spain. According to the reports, this was the largest ant colony on record; a piece of entomological history in the making. He halted his oration to lackadaisically introduce the Eastern gentlemen as Mr. Jackson Phillips and Mr. Carrey Montague and then jabbed Campbell in the ribs, saying, "What'd I tell you? Rich is as suave as an Italian prince. Thank God I don't have a daughter for him to knock up." To Partridge he said, "Now go eat before cook throws it to the pigs. Go, go!" Campbell, the tallest and gravest of the congregation, gave Partridge a subtle wink. Meanwhile, the man in the wheelchair raised his voice to demand an explanation for why his valuable time was being wasted on an ant seminar. He had not come to listen to a dissertation and Toshi damned-well knew better… Partridge did not catch the rest because Beasley ushered him into the kitchen whilst surreptitiously flicking Mr. Jackson Phillips the bird.

The cook was an impeccable Hungarian named Gertz, whom Campbell had lured, or possibly blackmailed, away from a popular restaurant in Santa Monica. In any event, Gertz knew his business.

Partridge slumped on a wooden stool at the kitchen counter. He worked his way through what Gertz apologetically called "leftovers." These included sourdough waffles and strawberries, whipped eggs, biscuits, sliced apples, honey dew melon and chilled milk. The coffee was a hand-ground Columbian blend strong enough to peel paint. Beasley slapped him on the shoulder and said something about chores.

Partridge was sipping his second mug of coffee, liberally dosed with cream and sugar, when Nadine sat down close to him. Nadine shone darkly and smelled of fresh cut hayricks and sweet, highly polished leather. She leaned in tight and plucked the teaspoon from his abruptly nerveless fingers. She

licked the teaspoon and dropped it on the saucer and she did not smile at all. She looked at him with metallic eyes that held nothing but a prediction of snow.

"And… action," Nadine said in a soft, yet resonant voice that could have placed her center stage on Broadway had she ever desired to dwell in the Apple and ride her soap and water sex appeal to the bank and back. She spoke without a trace of humor, which was a worthless gauge to ascertain her mood anyhow, she being a classical Stoic. Her mouth was full and lovely and inches from Partridge's own. She did not wear lipstick.

"You're pissed," Partridge said. He felt slightly dizzy. He was conscious of his sticky fingers and the seeds in his teeth.

"Lucky guess."

"I'm a Scientologist, Grade Two. We get ESP at G-2. No luck involved."

"Oh, they got you, too. Pity. Inevitable, but still a pity."

"I'm kidding."

"What… even the cultists don't want you?"

"I'm sure they want my money."

Nadine tilted her head slightly. "I owe the Beez twenty bucks, speaking of. Know why?"

"No," Partridge said. "Wait. You said I wouldn't show—"

"—because you're a busy man—"

"That's the absolute truth. I'm busier than a one-armed paper hanger."

"I'm sure. Anyway, I said you'd duck us once again. A big movie deal, fucking a B-list starlet in the South of France. It'd be something."

"—and then Beasley said something on the order of—"

"Hell yeah, my boy will be here!—"

"—come hell or high water!"

"Pretty much, yeah. He believes in you."

Partridge tried not to squirm even as her pitiless gaze bore into him. "Well, it was close. I cancelled some things. Broke an engagement or two."

“Mmm. It’s okay, Rich. You’ve been promising yourself a vacation, haven’t you? This makes a handy excuse; do a little R&R, get some *you* time in for a change. It’s for your mental health. Bet you can write it off.”

“Since this is going so well… How’s Coop?” He had noticed she was not wearing the ring. Handsome hubby Dan Cooper was doubtless a sore subject, he being the hapless CEO of an obscure defense contractor that got caught up in a Federal dragnet. He would not be racing his classic Jaguar along hairpin coastal highways for the next five to seven years, even assuming time off for good behavior. Poor Coop was another victim of Nadine’s gothic curse. “Condolences, naturally. If I didn’t send a card…”

“He *loves* Federal prison. It’s a country club, really. How’s that bitch you introduced me to? I forget her name.”

“Rachel.”

“Yep, that’s it. The makeup lady. She pancaked Thurman like a corpse on that flick you shot for Coppola.”

“Ha, yeah. She’s around. We’re friends.”

“Always nice to have friends.”

Partridge forced a smile. “I’m seeing someone else.”

“Kyla Sherwood—the Peroxide Puppet. Tabloids know all, my dear.”

“But it’s not serious.”

“News to her, hey?”

He was boiling alive in his Aspen-chic sweater and charcoal slacks. Sweat trickled down his neck and the hairs on his thighs prickled and chorused their disquiet. He wondered if that was a massive pimple pinching the flesh between his eyes. That was where he had always gotten the worst of them in high school. His face swelled so majestically people thought he had broken his nose playing softball. What could he say with this unbearable pressure building in his lungs? Their history had grown to epic dimensions. The kitchen was too small to contain such a thing. He said, “Toshi said it was important. That I come to this… what? Party? Reunion? Whatever it is. God knows I love a mystery.”

Nadine stared the stare that gave away nothing. She finally glanced at her watch and stood. She leaned over him so that her hot breath brushed his ear.

“Mmm. Look at the time. Lovely seeing you, Rich. Maybe later we can do lunch.”

He watched her walk away. As his pulse slowed and his breathing loosened, he waited for his erection to subside and tried to pinpoint what it was that nagged him, what it was that tripped the machinery beneath the liquid surface of his guilt-crazed, testosterone-glutted brain. Nadine had always reminded him of a duskier, more ferocious Bettie Page. She was thinner now; her prominent cheekbones, the fragile symmetry of her scapulae through the open-back blouse, registered with him as he sat recovering his wits with the numb intensity of a soldier who had just clambered from a trench following a mortar barrage.

Gertz slunk out of hiding and poured more coffee into Partridge’s cup. He dumped in some Schnapps from a hip flask. “Hang in there, my friend,” he said drolly.

“I just got my head beaten in,” Partridge said.

“Round one,” Gertz said. He took a hefty pull from the flask. “Pace yourself, champ.”

Partridge wandered the grounds until he found Toshi in D-Lab. Toshi was surveying a breeding colony of cockroaches: *Pariplenata americana*, he proclaimed them with a mixture of pride and annoyance. The lab was actually a big tool shed with the windows painted over. Industrial-sized aquariums occupied most of the floor space. The air had acquired a peculiar, spicy odor reminiscent of hazelnuts and fermented bananas. The chamber was illuminated by infrared lamps. Partridge could not observe much activity within the aquariums unless he stood next to the glass. That was not going to happen. He contented himself to lurk at Toshi’s elbow while a pair of men in coveralls and rubber gloves performed maintenance on an empty pen. The men scraped substrate into garbage bags and hosed the container and applied copious swathes of petroleum jelly to the rim where the mesh lid attached. Cockroaches were escape artists extraordinaire, according to Toshi.

“Most folks are trying to figure the best pesticide to squirt on these little fellas. Here you are a cockroach rancher,” Partridge said.

“Cockroaches… I care nothing for cockroaches. This is scarcely more than a side effect, the obligatory nod to cladistics, if you will. Cockroaches… beetles… there are superficial similarities. These animals crawl and burrow, they predate us humans by hundreds of millions of years. But… beetles are infinitely more interesting. The naturalist’s best friend. Museums and taxidermists love them, you see. Great for cleaning skeletal structures, antlers and the like.”

“Nature’s efficiency experts. What’s the latest venture?”

“A-Lab—I will show you.” Toshi became slightly animated. He straightened his crunched shoulders to gesticulate. His hand glimmered like a glow tube at a rock concert. “I keep a dozen colonies of dermestid beetles in operation. Have to house them in glass or stainless steel—they nibble through anything.”

This house of creepy-crawlies was not good for Partridge’s nerves. He thought of the chair and the woman and her tarantula. He was sickly aware that if he closed his eyes at that very moment the stranger would remove the mask and reveal Nadine’s face. Thinking of Nadine’s face and its feverish luminescence, he said, “She’s dying.”

Toshi shrugged. “Johns Hopkins… my friends at Fred Hutch… nobody can do anything. This is the very bad stuff; very quick.”

“How long has she got.” The floor threatened to slide from under Partridge’s feet. Cockroaches milled in their shavings and hidey holes; their tick-tack impacts burrowed under his skin.

“Not long. Probably three or four months.”

“Okay.” Partridge tasted breakfast returned as acid in his mouth.

The technicians finished their task and began sweeping. Toshi gave some orders. He said to Partridge, “Let’s go see the beetles.”

A-Lab was identical to D-Lab except for the wave of charnel rot that met Partridge as he entered. The dermestid colonies were housed in corrugated metal canisters. Toshi raised the lid to show Partridge how industriously a particular group of larvae were stripping the greasy flesh of a small mixed-

breed dog. Clean white bone peeked through coagulated muscle fibers and patches of coarse, blond fur.

Partridge managed to stagger the fifteen or so feet and vomit into a plastic sink. Toshi shut the lid and nodded wisely. “Some fresh air, then.”

Toshi conducted a perfunctory tour, complete with a wheezing narrative regarding matters coleopteran and teuthological, the latter being one of his comrade Howard Campbell’s manifold specialties. Campbell had held since the early ’70s that One Day Soon the snail cone or some species of jellyfish was going to revolutionize neurology. Partridge nodded politely and dwelt on his erupting misery. His stomach felt as if a brawler had used it for a speed bag. He trembled and dripped with cold sweats.

Then, as they ambled along a fence holding back the wasteland beyond the barn, he spotted a cluster of three satellite dishes. The dishes’ antennas were angled downward at a sizable oblong depression like aardvark snouts poised to siphon musty earth. These were lightweight models, each no more than four meters across and positioned as to be hidden from casual view from the main house. Their trapezoidal shapes didn’t jibe with photos Partridge had seen of similar devices. These objects gleamed the yellow-gray gleam of rotting teeth. His skin crawled as he studied them and the area of crushed soil. The depression was over a foot deep and shaped not unlike a kiddy wading pool. This presence in the field was incongruous and somehow sinister. He immediately regretted discarding his trusty Canon. He stopped and pointed. “What are those?”

“Radio telescopes, obviously.”

“Yeah, what kind of metal is that? Don’t they work better if you point them at the sky?”

“The sky. Ah, well, perhaps later. You note the unique design, eh? Campbell and I… invented them. Basically.”

“Really? Interesting segue from entomological investigation, doc.”

“See what happens when you roll in the mud with NASA? The notion of first contact is so glamorous, it begins to rub off. Worse than drugs. I’m in recovery.”

Partridge stared at the radio dishes. “UFOs and whatnot, huh. You stargazer, you. When did you get into that field?” It bemused him how Toshi Ryoko hopscotched from discipline to discipline with a breezy facility that unnerved even the mavericks among his colleagues.

“I most assuredly haven’t migrated to that field—however, I will admit to grazing as the occasion warrants. The dishes are a link in the chain. We’ve got miles of conductive coil buried around here. All part of a comprehensive surveillance plexus. We monitor everything that crawls, swims or flies. Howard and I have become enamored of astrobiology, cryptozoology, the occulted world. Do you recall when we closed shop in California? That was roughly concomitant with our lamentably over-publicized misadventures in New Guinea.”

“Umm.” Partridge had heard that Campbell and Toshi disappeared into the back country for three weeks after they lost a dozen porters and two graduate students in a river accident. Maybe alcohol and drugs were involved. There was an investigation and all charges were waived. The students’ families had sued and sued, of course. Partridge knew he should have called to offer moral support. Unfortunately, associating with Toshi in that time of crisis might have been an unwise career move and he let it slide. *But nothing slides forever, does it?*

“New Guinea wasn’t really a disaster. Indeed, it served to crystallize the focus of our research, to open new doors…”

Partridge was not thrilled to discuss New Guinea. “Intriguing. I’m glad you’re going great guns. It’s over my head, but I’m glad. Sincerely.” Several crows described broad, looping circles near the unwholesome machines. Near, but not too near.

“Ah, but that’s not important. I imagine I shall die before any of this work comes to fruition.” Toshi smiled fondly and evasively. He gave Partridge an avuncular pat on the arm. “You’re here for Nadine’s grand farewell. She will leave the farm after the weekend. Everything is settled. You see now why I called. ”

Partridge was not convinced. Nadine seemed to resent his presence—she’d always been hot and cold when it came to him. What did Toshi want him to do? “Absolutely,” he said.

They walked back to the house and sat on the porch in rocking chairs. Gertz brought them a pitcher of iced tea and frosted glasses on trays. Campbell emerged in his trademark double-breasted steel-blue suit and horn-rimmed glasses. For the better part of three decades he had played the mild, urbane foil to Toshi's megalomaniacal iconoclast. In private, Campbell was easily the dominant of the pair. He leaned against a post and held out his hand until Toshi passed him a smoldering cigarette. "I'm glad you know," he said, fastening his murky eyes on Partridge. "I didn't have the nerve to tell you myself."

Partridge felt raw, exhausted and bruised. He changed the subject. "So… those guys in the suits. Montague and Phillips. How do you know them? Financiers, I presume?"

"Patrons," Campbell said. "As you can see, we've scaled back the operation. It's difficult to run things off the cuff." Lolling against the post, a peculiar hybrid of William Burroughs and Walter Cronkite, he radiated folksy charm that mostly diluted underlying hints of decadence. This charm often won the hearts of flabby dilettante crones looking for a cause to champion. "Fortunately, there are always interested parties with deep pockets."

Partridge chuckled to cover his unease. His stomach was getting worse. "Toshi promised to get me up to speed on your latest and greatest contribution to the world of science. Or do I want to know?"

"You showed him the telescopes? Anything else?" Campbell glanced at Toshi and arched his brow.

Toshi's grin was equal portions condescension and mania. He rubbed his spindly hands together like a spider combing its pedipalps. "Howard… I haven't, he hasn't been to the site. He has visited with our pets, however. Mind your shoes if you fancy them, by the way."

"Toshi has developed a knack for beetles," Campbell said. "I don't know what he sees in them, frankly. Boring, boring. Pardon the pun—I'm stone knackered on Dewar's. My bloody joints are positively gigantic in this climate. Oh—have you seen reports of the impending Yellow Disaster? China will have the whole of Asia Minor deforested in the next decade. I imagine you haven't—you don't film horror movies, right? At least not

reality horror." He laughed as if to say, *You realize I'm kidding, don't you, lad? We're all friends here*. "Mankind is definitely eating himself out of house and home. The beetles and cockroaches are in the direct line of succession."

"Scary," Partridge said. He waited doggedly for the punch line. Although, free association was another grace note of Campbell's and Toshi's. The punch line might not even exist. Give them thirty seconds and they would be nattering about engineering *E. coli* to perform microscopic stupid pet tricks or how much they missed those good old Bangkok whores.

Toshi lighted another cigarette and waved it carelessly. "The boy probably hasn't the foggiest notion as to the utility of our naturalistic endeavors. Look, after dinner, we'll give a demonstration. We'll hold a séance."

"Oh, horseshit, Toshi!" Campbell scowled fearsomely. This was always a remarkable transformation for those not accustomed to his moods. "Considering the circumstances, that's extremely tasteless."

"Not to mention premature," Partridge said through a grim smile. He rose, upsetting his drink in a clatter of softened ice cubes and limpid orange rinds and strode from the porch. He averted his face. He was not certain if Campbell called after him because of the blood beating in his ears. Toshi did clearly say, "Let him go, let him be, Howard… She'll talk to him…"

He stumbled to his room and crashed into his too-short bed and fell unconscious.

Partridge owed much of his success to Toshi. Even that debt might not have been sufficient to justify the New England odyssey. The real reason, the motive force under the hood of Partridge's lamentable midlife crisis, and the magnetic compulsion to heed that bizarre late-night call, was certainly his sense of unfinished business with Nadine. Arguably, he had Toshi to thank for that, too.

Toshi Ryoko immigrated to Britain, and later the U.S., from Okinawa in the latter '60s. This occurred a few years after he had begun to attract attention from the international scientific community for his brilliant work in behavioral ecology and prior to his stratospheric rise to popular fame due to

daredevil eccentricities and an Academy Award-nominated documentary of his harrowing expedition into the depths of a Bengali wildlife preserve. The name of the preserve loosely translated into English as “The Forest that Eats Men.” Partridge had been the twenty-three-year-old cinematographer brought aboard at the last possible moment to photograph the expedition. No more qualified person could be found on the ridiculously short notice that Toshi announced for departure. The director/producer was none other than Toshi himself. It was his first and last film. There were, of course, myriad subsequent independent features, newspaper and radio accounts—the major slicks covered Toshi’s controversial exploits, but he lost interest in filmmaking after the initial hubbub and eventually faded from the public eye. Possibly his increasing affiliation with clandestine U.S. government projects was to blame. The cause was immaterial. Toshi’s fascinations were mercurial and stardom proved incidental to his mission of untangling the enigmas of evolutionary origins and ultimate destination.

Partridge profited greatly from that tumultuous voyage into the watery hell of man-eating tigers and killer bees. He emerged from the crucible as a legend fully formed. His genesis was as Minerva’s, that warrior-daughter sprung whole from Jupiter’s aching skull. All the great directors wanted him. His name was gold—it was nothing but Beluga caviar and box seats at the Rose Bowl, a string of “where are they now” actresses on his arm, an executive membership in the Ferrari Club and posh homes in Malibu and Ireland. Someday they would hang his portrait in the American Society of Cinematography archives and blazon his star on Hollywood Boulevard.

There was just one glitch in his happily-ever-after: Nadine. Nadine Thompson was the whip-smart Stanford physiologist who had gone along for the ride to Bangladesh as Toshi’s chief disciple. She was not Hollywood sultry, yet the camera found her to be eerily riveting in a way that was simultaneously erotic and repellant. The audience never saw a *scientist* when the camera tracked Nadine across the rancid deck of that river barge. They saw a woman-child—ripe, lithe and lethally carnal.

She was doomed. Jobs came and went. Some were comparative plums, yes. None of them led to prominence indicative of her formal education and nascent talent. None of them opened the way to the marquee projects, postings or commissions. She eventually settled for a staff position at a

museum in Buffalo. An eighty-seven-minute film shot on super-sixteen millimeter consigned her to professional purgatory. Maybe a touch of that taint had rubbed off on Partridge. Nadine was the youthful excess that Hollywood could not supply, despite its excess of youth, the one he still longed for during the long, blank Malibu nights. He carried a load of guilt about the whole affair as well.

Occasionally, in the strange, hollow years after the hoopla, the groundswell of acclaim and infamy, she would corner Partridge in a remote getaway bungalow, or a honeymoon seaside cottage, for a weekend of gin and bitters and savage lovemaking. In the languorous aftermath, she often confided how his magic Panaflex had destroyed her career. She would forever be "the woman in that movie." She was branded a real-life scream queen and the sex pot with the so-so face and magnificent ass.

Nadine was right, as usual. "The Forest that Eats Men" never let go once it sank its teeth.

He dreamed of poling a raft on a warm, muddy river. Mangroves hemmed them in corridors of convoluted blacks and greens. Creepers and vines strung the winding waterway. Pale sunlight sifted down through the screen of vegetation; a dim, smoky light full of shadows and shifting clouds of gnats and mosquitoes. Birds warbled and screeched. He crouched in the stern of the raft and stared at the person directly before him. That person's wooden mask with its dead eyes and wooden smile gaped at him, fitted as it was to the back of the man's head. The wooden mouth whispered, "You forgot your mask." Partridge reached back and found, with burgeoning horror, that his skull was indeed naked and defenseless.

"They're coming. They're coming." The mask grinned soullessly.

He inhaled to scream and jerked awake, twisted in the sheets and sweating. Red light poured through the thin curtains. Nadine sat in the shadows at the foot of his bed. Her hair was loose and her skin reflected the ruddy light. He thought of the goddess Kali shrunk to mortal dimensions.

"You don't sleep well either, huh," she said.

"Nope. Not since Bangladesh."

“That long. Huh.”

He propped himself on his elbow and studied her. “I’ve been considering my options lately. I’m thinking it might be time to hang up my spurs. Go live in the Bahamas.”

She said, “You’re too young to go.” That was her mocking tone.

“You too.”

She didn’t say anything for a while. Then, “Rich, you ever get the feeling you’re being watched?”

“Like when you snuck in here while I was sleeping? Funny you should mention it…”

“Rich.”

He saw that she was serious. “Sometimes, yeah.”

“Well you are. Always. I want you to keep that in mind.”

“Okay. Will it help?”

“Good question.”

The room darkened, bit by bit. He said, “You think you would’ve made it back to the barge?” He couldn’t distance himself from her cry as she flailed overboard and hit the water like a stone. There were crocodiles everywhere. No one moved. The whole crew was frozen in that moment between disbelief and action. He had shoved the camera at, who? Beasley. He had done that and then gone in and gotten her. Blood-warm water, brown with mud. He did not remember much of the rest. The camera caught it all.

“No,” she said. “Not even close.”

He climbed over the bed and hugged her. She was warm. He pressed his face into her hair. Her hair trapped the faint, cloying odor of sickness. “I’m so fucking sorry,” he said.

She didn’t say anything. She rubbed his shoulder.

That night was quiet at the Moorehead Estate. There was a subdued dinner and afterward some drinks. Everybody chatted about the good old days. The real ones and the imaginary ones too. Phillips and Montague disappeared early on and took their men-at-arms with them. Nadine sat aloof. She held onto a hardback—one of Toshi’s long out of print treatises on insect

behavior and ecological patterns. Partridge could tell she was only pretending to look at it.

Later, after lights out, Partridge roused from a dream of drowning in something that wasn't quite water. His name was whispered from the foot of the bed. He fumbled upright in the smothering dark. "Nadine?" He clicked on the lamp and saw he was alone.

It rained in the morning. Toshi was undeterred. He put on a slicker and took a drive in the Land Rover to move the radio telescopes and other equipment into more remote fields. A truckload of the burly, grim laborers followed. The technicians trudged about their daily routine, indifferent to the weather. Campbell disappeared with Phillips and Montague. Nadine remained in her room. Partridge spent the morning playing poker with Beasley and Gertz on the rear porch. They drank whiskey—coffee for Beasley—and watched water drip from the eaves and thunderheads roll across the horizon trailing occasional whip-cracks of lightning. Then it stopped raining and the sun transformed the landscape into a mass of illuminated rust and glass.

Partridge went for a long walk around the property to clear his head and savor the clean air. The sun was melting toward the horizon when Beasley found him dozing in the shade of an oak. It was a huge tree with yellowing leaves and exposed roots. The roots crawled with pill bugs. Between yawns Partridge observed the insects go about their tiny business.

"C'mon. You gotta see the ghost town before it gets dark," Beasley said. Partridge didn't bother to protest. Nadine waited in the jeep. She wore tortoise shell sunglasses and a red scarf in her hair. He decided she looked better in a scarf than Toshi ever had, no question. Partridge opened his mouth and Beasley gave him a friendly shove into the front passenger seat.

"Sulk, sulk, sulk!" Nadine laughed at him. "In the garden, eating worms?"

"Close enough," Partridge said, and hung on as Beasley gunned the jeep through a break in the fence line and zoomed along an overgrown track that was invisible until they were right on top of it. The farm became a picture on a stamp and then they passed through a belt of paper birches and red maples. They crossed a ramshackle bridge that spanned an ebon stream and

drove into a clearing. Beasley ground gears until they gained the crown of a long, tabletop hill. He killed the engine and coasted to a halt amid tangled grass and wildflowers and said, “Orren Towne. Died circa 1890s.”

Below their vantage, remnants of a village occupied the banks of a shallow valley. If Orren Towne was dead its death was the living kind. A score of saltbox houses and the brooding hulk of a Second Empire church waited somberly. Petrified roofs were dappled by the shadows of moving clouds. Façades were brim with the ephemeral light of the magic hour. Beasley’s walkie-talkie crackled and he stepped aside to answer the call.

Nadine walked partway down the slope and stretched her arms. Her muscles stood forth in cords of sinew and gristle. She looked over her shoulder at Partridge. Her smile was alien. “Don’t you wish you’d brought your camera?”

The brain is a camera. What Partridge really wished was that he had gone to his room and slept. His emotions were on the verge of running amok. The animal fear from his daydreams had sneaked up again. He smelled the musk of his own adrenaline and sweat. *The brain is a camera and once it sees what it sees there’s no taking it back.* He noticed another of Toshi’s bizarre radio dishes perched on a bluff. The antenna was focused upon the deserted buildings. “I don’t like this place,” he said. But she kept walking and he trailed along. It was cooler among the houses. The earth was trampled into concrete and veined with minerals. Nothing organic grew and no birds sang. The subtly deformed structures were encased in a transparent resin that lent the town the aspect of a waxworks. He thought it might be shellac.

Shadows fell across Partridge’s path. Open doorways and sugar-spun windows fronted darkness. These doors and windows were as unwelcoming as the throats of ancient wells, the mouths of caves. He breathed heavily. “How did Toshi do this? *Why* did he do this?”

Nadine laughed and took his hand playfully. Hers was dry and too-warm, like a leather wallet left in direct sunlight. “Toshi only discovered it. Do you seriously think he and Howard are capable of devising something this extraordinary?”

“No.”

“Quite a few people spent their lives in this valley. Decent farming and hunting in these parts. The Mooreheads owned about everything. They owned a brewery and a mill down the road, near their estate. All those busy little worker bees going about their jobs, going to church on Sunday. I’m sure it was a classic Hallmark. Then it got cold. One of those long winters that never ends. Nothing wanted to grow and the game disappeared. The house burned. Sad for the Mooreheads. Sadder for the people who depended on them. The family circled its wagons to rebuild the mansion, but the community never fully recovered. Orren Towne was here today, gone tomorrow. At least that’s the story we hear told by the old-timers at the Mad Rooster over cribbage and a pint of stout.” Nadine stood in the shade of the church, gazing up, up at the crucifix. “This is how it will all be someday. Empty buildings. Empty skies. The grass will come and eat everything we ever made. The waters will swallow it. It puts my situation into perspective, lemme tell you.”

“These buildings should’ve fallen down. Somebody’s gone through a lot of trouble to keep this like—”

“A museum. Yeah, somebody has. This isn’t the only place it’s been done, either.”

“Places like this? Where?” Partridge said. He edged closer to the bright center of the village square.

“I don’t know. They’re all over if you know what to look for.”

“Nadine, maybe… Jesus!” He jerked his head to peer at a doorway. The darkness inside the house seemed fuller and more complete. “Are there people here?” His mind jumped to an image of the masks that the natives wore to ward off tigers. He swallowed hard.

“Just us chickens, love.”

A stiff breeze rushed from the northwest and whipped the outlying grass. Early autumn leaves skated across the glassy rooftops and swirled in barren yards. Leaves fell dead and dry. Night was coming hard.

“I’m twitchy—jet lag, probably. What do those weird-looking rigs do?” He pointed at the dish on the hill. “Toshi said they’re radio telescopes he invented.”

“He said he invented them? Oh my. I dearly love that man, but sometimes he’s such an asshole.”

“Yeah. How do they work?”

Nadine shrugged. “They read frequencies on the electromagnetic spectrum.”

“Radio signals from underground. Why does that sound totally backwards to me?”

“I didn’t say anything about radio signals.”

“Then what did you say?”

“When we get back, ask Toshi about the node.”

“What are you talking about?” Partridge’s attention was divided between her and the beautifully grotesque houses and the blackness inside them.

“You’ll see. Get him to show you the node. That’ll clear some of this stuff up, pronto.”

Beasley called to them. He and the jeep were a merged silhouette against the failing sky. He swung his arm overhead until Nadine yelled that they would start back in a minute. She removed her shades and met Partridge’s eyes. “You okay, Rich?” She refused to relinquish her grip on his hand.

“You’re asking *me?*”

She gave him another of her inscrutable looks. She reached up and pushed an unkempt lock from his forehead. “I’m not mad, in case you’re still wondering. I wanted you to see me off. Not like there’re any more weekend rendezvous in the stars for us.”

“That’s no way to talk,” he said.

“Just sayin’.” She dropped his hand and walked away. In a moment he followed. By the time they made the summit, darkness had covered the valley. Beasley had to use the headlights to find the way home.

Gertz served prawns for dinner. They ate at the long mahogany table in the formal dining room. Jackson Phillips begged off due to an urgent matter in the city. Beasley packed him and one of the muscle-bound bodyguards into

the helicopter and flew away. That left six: Toshi; Campbell; Nadine; Carrey Montague and the other bodyguard; and Partridge. The men wore suits and ties. Nadine wore a cream-colored silk chiffon evening gown. There were candles and elaborate floral arrangements and dusty bottles of wine from the Moorehead cellar and magnums of top-dollar French champagne from a Boston importer who catered to those with exclusive tastes and affiliations. Toshi proposed a toast and said a few words in Japanese and then the assembly began to eat and drink.

Somewhere in the middle of the third or fourth course, Partridge realized he was cataclysmically drunk. They kept setting them up and he kept knocking them down. Toshi or Campbell frequently clapped his back and clinked his glass and shouted "*Sic itur ad astra!"* and another round would magically appear. His head was swollen and empty as an echo chamber. The winking silverware and sloshing wineglasses, the bared teeth and hearty laughter came to him from a sea shell. He caught Nadine watching him from across the table, her eyes cool, her mouth set inscrutably. He poured more liquor down his throat to break their moment of recognition, and when he checked again she'd left the table, her untouched meal, and sailed from the room.

Dinner blurred into a collage of sense and chaos, of light and dark, and he gripped his glass and blinked dumbly against the shattering flare of the low-slung chandelier and laughed uproariously. Without transition, dinner was concluded and the men had repaired to the den to relax over snifters of Hennessy. They lounged in wing-backed leather chairs and upon opulent leather divans. Partridge admired the vaulted ceiling, the library of towering lacquered oak bookcases and the impressive collection of antique British rifles and British cavalry sabers cached in rearing cabinets of chocolate wood and softly warped glass. Everything was so huge and shiny and far away. When the cigar and pipe smoke hung thick and the men's cheeks were glazed and rosy as the cheeks of Russian dolls, he managed, "I'm supposed to ask you about the node."

Campbell smiled a broad and genial smile. "The node, yes. The node, of course, is the very reason Mr. Phillips and Mr. Montague have come to pay their respects. They hope to buy their way into Heaven."

“He’s right, he’s right,” Mr. Carrey Montague said with an air of merry indulgence. “Jack had his shot. Didn’t he though. Couldn’t hack it and off he flew.”

“I was getting to this,” Toshi said. “In a roundabout fashion.”

“Exceedingly so,” Campbell said.

“Didn’t want to frighten him. It’s a delicate matter.”

“Yes,” Campbell said dryly. He puffed on his pipe and his eyes were red around the edges and in the center of his pupils.

“Shall I. Or do you want a go?” Toshi shrugged his indifference.

“The node is a communication device,” Campbell said through a mouthful of smoke. “Crude, really. Danforth Moorehead, the Moorehead patriarch, developed the current model. Ahem, the schematic was delivered to him and he effected the necessary modifications, at any rate. Admittedly, it’s superior to the primitive methods—scrying, séances, psychedelic drugs, that nonsense. Not to mention some of the more gruesome customs we’ve observed in the provincial regions. Compared to that, the node is state of the art. It is a reservoir that filters and translates frequency imaging captured by our clever, clever radio telescopes. It permits us to exchange information with our… neighbors.”

Partridge dimly perceived that the others were watching him with something like fascination. Their eyes glittered through the haze. “With who? I don’t—”

“Our neighbors,” Campbell said.

“Oh, the things they show you.” Carrey Montague sucked on his oxygen mask until he resembled a ghoul.

Partridge swung his head to look from face to face. The men were drunk. The men seethed with restrained glee. No one appeared to be joking. “Well, go on then,” he said dreamily. His face was made of plaster. Black spots revolved before him like ashen snowflakes.

“I told you, Richard. Mankind can’t go on like this.”

“Like what?”

Toshi chuckled. “Assuming we don’t obliterate ourselves, or that a meteorite doesn’t smack us back to the Cambrian, if not the Cryptozoic, this planet will succumb to the exhaustion of Sol. First the mammals, then the reptiles, right down the line until all that’s left of any complexity are the arthropods: beetles and cockroaches and their oceanic cousins, practically speaking. Evolution is a circle—we’re sliding back to that endless sea of protoplasmic goop.”

“I’m betting on the nuclear holocaust,” Campbell said.

Partridge slopped more brandy into his mouth. He was far beyond tasting it. “Mmm hmm,” he said intelligently and cast about for a place to inconspicuously ditch his glass.

“NASA and its holy grail—First Contact, the quest for intelligent life in the universe… all hogwash, all lies.” Toshi gently took the snifter away and handed him a fresh drink in a ceramic mug. This was not brandy; it was rich and dark as honey in moonlight. “Private stock, my boy. Drink up!” Partridge drank and his eyes flooded and he choked a little. Toshi nodded in satisfaction. “We know now what we’ve always suspected. Man is completely and utterly alone in a sea of dust and smoke. Alone and inevitably slipping into extinction.”

“Not quite alone,” Campbell said. “There are an estimated five to eight million species of insects as of yet unknown and unclassified. Hell of a lot of insects, hmm? But why stop at bugs? Only a damned fool would suppose that was anything but the tip of the iceberg. When the time of Man comes to an end *their* time will begin. And be certain this is not an invasion or a hostile occupation. We’ll be dead as Dodos a goodly period before they emerge to claim the surface. They won’t rule forever. The planet will eventually become cold and inhospitable to any mortal organism. But trust that their rule will make the reign of the terrible lizards seem a flicker of an eyelash.”

“You’re talking about cockroaches,” Partridge said in triumph. “Fucking cockroaches.” That was too amusing and so he snorted on his pungent liquor and had a coughing fit.

“No, we are not,” Campbell said.

“We aren’t talking about spiders or beetles, either,” Toshi said. He gave Partridge’s knee an earnest squeeze. “To even compare them with the citizens of the *Great Kingdom*… I shudder. However, if I *were* to make that comparison, I’d say this intelligence is the Ur-progenitor of those insects scrabbling in the muck. The mother race of idiot stepchildren.”

Campbell knelt before him so they were eye to eye. The older man’s face was radiant and distant as the moon. “This is a momentous discovery. We’ve established contact. Not us, actually. It’s been going on forever. We are the latest… emissaries, if you will. Trustees to the grandest secret of them all.”

“Hoo boy. You guys. You fucking guys. Is Nadine in on this?”

“Best that you see firsthand. Would you like that, Rich?”

“Uhmm-wha?” Partridge did not know what he wanted except that he wanted the carousel to stop.

Campbell and Toshi stood. They took his arms and the next thing he knew they were outside in the humid country night with darkness all around. He tried to walk, but his legs wouldn’t cooperate much. They half dragged him to a dim metal door and there was a lamp bulb spinning in space and then steep, winding concrete stairs and cracked concrete walls ribbed with mold. They went down and down and a strong, earthy smell overcame Partridge’s senses. People spoke to him in rumbling nonsense phrases. Someone ruffled his hair and laughed. His vision fractured. He glimpsed hands and feet, a piece of jaw illumed by a quivering fluorescent glow. When the hands stopped supporting him, he slid to his knees. He had the impression of kneeling in a cellar. Water dripped and a pale overhead lamp hummed like a wasp in a jar. From the corner of his eye he got the sense of table legs and cables and he smelled an acrid smell like cleaning solvents. He thought it might be a laboratory.

—Crawl forward just a bit.

It was strange whatever lay before him. Something curved, spiral-shaped and darkly wet. A horn, a giant conch shell, it was impossible to be certain. There was an opening, as the *external os* of a cervix, large enough to accommodate him in all his lanky height. Inside it was moist and muffled and black.

—There’s a lad. Curl up inside. Don’t fight. There, there. That’s my boy. Won’t be long. Not long. Don’t be afraid. This is only a window, not a doorway.

Then nothing and nothing and nothing; only his heart, his breathing and a whispery static thrum that might’ve been the electromagnetic current tracing its circuit through his nerves.

Nothingness grew very dense.

Partridge tried to shriek when water, or something thicker than water, flowed over his head and into his sinuses and throat. Low static built in his ears and the abject blackness was replaced by flashes of white imagery. He fell from an impossible height. He saw only high-velocity jump-cuts of the world and each caromed from him and into the gulf almost instantly. Fire and blood and moving tides of unleashed water. Bones of men and women and cities. Dead, mummified cities gone so long without inhabitants they had become cold and brittle and smooth as mighty forests of stone. There loomed over everything a silence that held to its sterile bosom countless screams and the sibilant chafe of swirling dust. Nadine stood naked as ebony in the heart of a ruined square. She wore a white mask, but he knew her with the immediacy of a nightmare. She lifted her mask and looked at him. She smiled and raised her hand. Men and women emerged from the broken skyscrapers and collapsed bunkers. They were naked and pallid and smiling. In the distance the sun heaved up, slow and red. Its deathly light cascaded upon the lines and curves of cyclopean structures. These were colossal, inhuman edifices of fossil bone and obsidian and anthracite that glittered not unlike behemoth carapaces. He thrashed and fell and fell and drowned.

Nadine said in his ear, *Come down. We love you*.

The cellar floor was cool upon his cheek. He was paralyzed and choking. The men spoke to him in soothing voices. Someone pressed a damp cloth to his brow.

—Take it easy, son. The first ride or two is a bitch and a half. Get his head.

Partridge groaned as gravity crushed him into the moldy concrete.

Someone murmured to him.

—They are interested in preserving aspects of our culture. Thus Orren Towne and places, hidden places most white men will never tread. Of course, it's a multifaceted project. Preserving artifacts, buildings, that's hardly enough to satisfy such an advanced intellect…

Partridge tired to speak. His jaw worked spastically. No sound emerged. The concrete went soft and everyone fell silent at once.

Partridge stirred and sat up. He tried to piece together how he ended up on the back porch sprawled in a wooden folding chair. He was still in his suit and it was damp and clung to him the way clothes do after they have been slept in. The world teetered on the cusp of night. Parts of the sky were orange as fire and other parts were covered by purple-tinted rain clouds like a pall of cannon smoke. Partridge's hair stood in gummy spikes. His mouth was swollen and cottony. He had drooled in his long sleep. His body was stiff as an old plank.

Beasley came out of the house and handed him a glass of seltzer water. "Can't hold your liquor anymore?"

Partridge took the glass in both hands and drank greedily. "Oh, you're back. Must've been a hell of a party," he said at last. He had slept for at least sixteen hours according to his watch. His memory was a smooth and frictionless void.

"Yeah," Beasley said. "You okay?"

Partridge was not sure. "Uh," he said. He rolled his head to survey the twilight vista. "Beasley."

"Yeah?"

"All this." Partridge swept his hand to encompass the swamped gardens and the decrepit outbuildings. "They're letting it fall down. Nobody left from the old days."

"You and me. And Nadine."

"And when we're gone?"

"We're all gonna be gone sooner or later. The docs… they just do what they can. There's nothing else, pal." Beasley gave him a searching look. He

shook his shaggy head and chuckled. “Don’t get morbid on me, Hollywood. Been a good run if you ask me. Hell, we may get a few more years before the plug gets pulled.”

“Is Montague still here?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I heard someone yelling, cursing. Earlier, while I slept.”

“Huh. Yeah, there was a little fight. The old fella didn’t get his golden ticket. He wasn’t wanted. Few are. He shipped out. Won’t be coming back.”

“I guess not. What was he after?”

“Same thing as everybody else, I suppose. People think Toshi is the Devil, that he can give them their heart’s desire if they sign on the dotted line. It ain’t so simple.”

Partridge had a wry chuckle at that. “Damned right it’s not simple, partner. I’m still selling my soul to Tinsel Town. No such luck as to unload the whole shebang at once.” Partridge shook with a sudden chill. His memory shucked and jittered; it spun off the reel in his brain and he could not gather it fast enough to make sense of what he had seen in the disjointed frames. “Lord, I hate the country. Always have. I really should get out of here, soon.”

“My advice—when you get on that bus, don’t look back,” Beasley said. “And keep your light on at night. You done with that?”

“Um-hmm.” He could not summon the energy to say more right then. The strength and the will had run out of him. He put his hand over his eyes and tried to concentrate.

Beasley took the empty glass and went back into the house. Darkness came and the yard lamps sizzled to life. Moths fluttered near his face, battered at the windows and Partridge wondered why that panicked him, why his heart surged and his fingernails dug into the arm rests. In the misty fields the drone of night insects began.

He eventually heaved to his feet and went inside and walked the dim, ugly corridors for an interminable period. He stumbled aimlessly as if he were yet drunk. His thoughts buzzed and muttered and were incoherent. He found Toshi and Campbell crouched in the den like grave robbers over a

stack of shrunken, musty ledgers with hand-sewn covers and other stacks of photographic plates like the kind shot from the air or a doctor's X-ray machine. The den was tomb-dark except for a single flimsy desk lamp. He swayed in the doorway, clinging to the jam as if he were in a cabin on a ship. He said, "Where is Nadine?"

The old men glanced up from their documents and squinted at him. Toshi shook his head and sucked his teeth. Campbell pointed at the ceiling. "She's in her room. Packing. It's Sunday night," he said. "You should go see her."

"She has to leave," Toshi said.

Partridge turned and left. He made his way up the great central staircase and tried a number of doors that let into dusty rooms with painters cloths draping the furniture. Light leaked from the jamb of one door and he went in without knocking.

"I've been waiting," Nadine said. Her room was smaller and more feminine than the Garden Room. She sat lotus on a poster bed. She wore a simple yellow sun dress and her hair in a knot. Her face was dented with exhaustion. "I got scared you might not come to say goodbye."

Partridge did not see any suitcases. A mostly empty bottle of pain medication sat on the night stand beside her wedding ring and a silver locket she had inherited from her great grandmother. He picked up the locket and let it spill through his fingers, back and forth between his hands.

"It's very late," she said. Her voice was not tired like her face. Her voice was steady and full of conviction. "Take me for a walk."

"Where?" he said.

"In the fields. One more walk in the fields."

He was afraid as he had been afraid when the moths came over him and against the windows. He was afraid as he had been when he pulled her from the water all those years ago and then lay in his hammock bunk dreaming and dreaming of the crocodiles and the bottomless depths warm as the recesses of his own body and she had shuddered against him, entwined with him and inextricably linked with him. He did not wish to leave the house, not at night. He said, "Sure. If you want to."

She climbed from the bed and took his hand. They walked down the stairs and through the quiet house. They left the house and the spectral yard and walked through a gate into the field and then farther into heavier and heavier shadows.

Partridge let Nadine lead. He stepped gingerly. He was mostly night blind and his head ached. Wet grass rubbed his thighs. He was soaked right away. A chipped edge of the ivory moon bit through the moving clouds. There were a few stars. They came to a shallow depression where the grass had been trampled or had sunk beneath the surface. Something in his memory twitched and a terrible cold knot formed in his stomach. He whined in his throat, uncomprehendingly, like a dog.

She hesitated in the depression and pulled her pale dress over her head. She tossed the dress away and stood naked and half-hidden in the fog and darkness. He did not need to see her, he had memorized everything. She slipped into the circle of his arms and he embraced her without thinking. She leaned up and kissed him. Her mouth was dry and hot. “Come on,” she muttered against his lips. “Come on.” Her hands were sinewy as talons and very strong. She grasped his hair and drew him against her and they slowly folded into the moist earth. The soft earth was disfigured with their writhing and a deep, resonant vibration traveled through it and into them where it yammered through their blood and bones. She kissed him fiercely, viciously, and locked her thighs over his hips and squeezed until he gasped and kissed her back. She did not relinquish her fistful of his hair and she did not close her eyes. He stared into them and saw a ghost of a girl he knew and his own gaunt reflection which he did not know at all. They were sinking.

Nadine stopped sucking at him and turned her head against the black dirt and toward the high, shivering grass. There was no breeze and the night lay dead and still. The grass sighed and muffled an approaching sound that struck Partridge as the thrum of fluorescent lights or high-voltage current through a wire or, as it came swiftly closer, the clatter of pebbles rolling over slate. Nadine tightened her grip and looked at him with a sublime combination of glassy terror and exultation. She said, “Rich—”

The grass shook violently beneath a vast, invisible hand and a tide of chirring and burring and click-clacking blackness poured into the

depression from far-flung expanses of lost pasture and haunted wilderness, from the moist abyssal womb that opens beneath everything, everywhere. The cacophony was a murderous tectonic snarl out of Pandemonium, Gehenna and Hell; the slaughterhouse gnash and whicker and serrated wail of legion bloodthirsty drills and meat-hungry saw teeth. The ebony breaker crashed over them and buried them and swallowed their screams before their screams began.

After the blackness ebbed and receded and was finally gone, it became quiet. At last the frogs tentatively groaned and the crickets warmed by degrees to their songs of loneliness and sorrow. The moon slipped into the moat around the Earth.

He rose alone, black on black, from the muck and walked back in shambling steps to the house.

Partridge sat rigid and upright at the scarred table in the blue-gray gloom of the kitchen. Through the one grimy window above the sink, the predawn sky glowed the hue of gun metal. His eyes glistened and caught that feeble light and held it fast like the eyes of a carp in its market bed of ice. His black face dripped onto his white shirt which was also black. His black hands lay motionless on the table. He stank of copper and urine and shit. Water leaked in fat drops from the stainless steel gooseneck tap. A grandfather clock ticked and tocked from the hall and counted down the seconds of the revolutions of the Earth. The house settled and groaned fitfully, a guilty pensioner caught fast in dreams.

Toshi materialized in the crooked shadows near the stove. His face was masked by the shadows. He said in a low, hoarse voice that suggested a quantity of alcohol and tears, “Occasionally one of us, a volunteer, is permitted to cross over, to relinquish his or her flesh to the appetites of the colony and exist among them in a state of pure consciousness. That’s how it’s always been. These volunteers become the interpreters, the facilitators of communication between our species. They become undying repositories of our civilization… a civilization that shall become ancient history one day very soon.”

Partridge said nothing.

Toshi said in his hoarse, mournful voice, “She’ll never truly die. She’ll be with them until this place is a frozen graveyard orbiting a cinder. It is an honor. Yet she waited. She wanted to say goodbye in person.”

Partridge said nothing. The sun floated to the black rim of the horizon. The sun hung crimson and boiling and a shaft of bloody light passed through the window and bathed his hand.

“Oh!” Toshi said and his mouth was invisible, but his eyes were bright and wet in the gathering light. “Can you *imagine* gazing upon constellations a hundred million years from this dawn? Can you imagine the wonder of gazing upon those constellations from a hundred million eyes? Oh, imagine it, my boy…”

Partridge stood and went wordlessly, ponderously, to the window and lingered there a moment, his mud-caked face afire with the bloody radiance of a dying star. He drank in the slumbering fields, the distant fog-wreathed forests, as if he might never look upon any of it again. He reached up and pulled the shade down tight against the sill and it was dark.

The Lagerstätte

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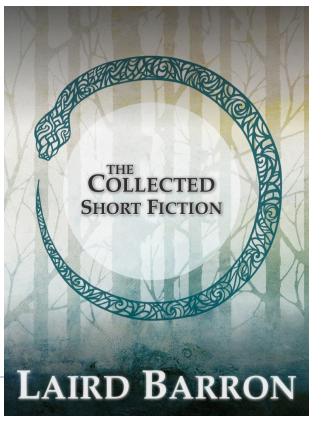


October 2004

Virgil acquired the cute little blue-and-white-pinstriped Cessna at an auction; this over Danni's strenuous objections. There were financial issues; Virgil's salary as department head at his software development company wasn't scheduled to increase for another eighteen months and they'd recently enrolled their son Keith in an exclusive grammar school. Thirty grand a year was a serious hit on their rainy-day fund. Also, Danni didn't like planes, especially small ones, which she asserted were scarcely more than tin, plastic, and balsawood. She even avoided traveling by commercial airliner if it was possible to drive or take a train. But she couldn't compete with love at first sight. Virgil took one look at the four-seater and practically swooned, and Danni knew she'd had it before the argument even started. Keith begged to fly and Virgil promised to teach him, teased that he might be the only kid to get his pilot's license before he learned to drive.

Because Danni detested flying so much, when their assiduously planned weeklong vacation rolled around, she decided to boycott the flight and meet her husband and son at the in-laws place on Cape Cod a day late, after wrapping up business in the city. The drive was only a couple of hours—she'd be at the house in time for Friday supper. She saw them off from a small airport in the suburbs, and returned home to pack and go over last minute adjustments to her evening lecture at the museum.

How many times did the plane crash between waking and sleeping? There was no way to measure that; during the first weeks the accident cycled through a continuous playback loop, cheap and grainy and soundless like a closed circuit security feed. They'd recovered pieces of fuselage from the

water, bobbing like cork—she caught a few moments of news footage before someone, probably Dad, killed the television.

They threw the most beautiful double funeral courtesy of Virgil's parents, followed by a reception in his family's summer home. She recalled wavering shadowbox lights and the muted hum of voices, men in black hats clasping cocktails to the breasts of their black suits, and severe women gathered near the sharper, astral glow of the kitchen, faces gaunt and cold as porcelain, their dresses black, their children underfoot and dressed as adults in miniature; and afterward, a smooth descent into darkness like a bullet reversing its trajectory and dropping into the barrel of a gun.

Later, in the hospital, she chuckled when she read the police report. It claimed she'd eaten a bottle of pills she'd found in her mother-in-law's dresser and curled up to die in her husband's closet among his little league uniforms and boxes of trophies. That was simply hilarious because anyone who knew her would know the notion was just too goddamned melodramatic for words.

March 2005

About four months after she lost her husband and son, Danni transplanted to the West Coast, taken in by a childhood friend named Merrill Thurman, and cut all ties with extended family, peers, and associates from before the accident. She eventually lost interest in grieving just as she lost interest in her former career as an entomologist; both were exercises of excruciating tediousness and ultimately pointless in the face of her brand new, freewheeling course. All those years of college and marriage were abruptly and irrevocably reduced to the fond memories of another life, a chapter in a closed book.

Danni was satisfied with the status quo of patchwork memory and aching numbness. At her best, there were no highs, no lows, just a seamless thrum as one day rolled into the next. She took to perusing self-help pamphlets and treatises on Eastern philosophy, and trendy art magazines; she piled them in her room until they wedged the door open. She studied Tai Chi during an eight-week course in the decrepit gym of the crosstown YMCA.

She toyed with an easel and paints, attended a class at the community college. She'd taken some drafting as an undergrad. This was helpful for the technical aspects, the geometry of line and space; the actual artistic part proved more difficult. Maybe she needed to steep herself in the bohemian culture—a coldwater flat in Paris, or an artist commune, or a sea shanty on the coast of Barbados.

Oh, but she'd never live alone, would she?

Amidst this reevaluation and reordering, came the fugue, a lunatic element that found genesis in the void between melancholy and nightmare. The fugue made familiar places strange; it wiped away friendly faces and replaced them with beekeeper masks and reduced English to the low growl of the swarm. It was a disorder of trauma and shock, a hybrid of temporary dementia and selective amnesia. It battened to her with the mindless tenacity of a leech.

She tried not to think about its origins, because when she did she was carried back to the twilight land of her subconscious; to Keith's fifth birthday party; her wedding day with the thousand-dollar cake, and the honeymoon in Niagara Falls; the Cessna spinning against the sun, streaking downward to slam into the Atlantic; and the lush corruption of a green-black jungle and its hidden cairns—the bones of giants slowly sinking into the always hungry earth.

The palace of cries where the doors are opened with blood and sorrow. The secret graveyard of the elephants. The bones of elephants made a forest of ribcages and tusks, dry riverbeds of skulls. Red ants crawled in trains along the petrified spines of behemoths and trailed into the black caverns of empty sockets. Oh, what the lost expeditions might've told the world!

She'd dreamt of the Elephants' Graveyard off and on since the funeral and wasn't certain why she had grown so morbidly preoccupied with the legend. Bleak mythology had interested her when she was young and vital and untouched by the twin melanomas of wisdom and grief. Now, such morose contemplation invoked a primordial dread and answered nothing. The central mystery of her was impenetrable to casual methods. Delving beneath the surface smacked of finality, of doom.

Danni chose to endure the fugue, to welcome it as a reliable adversary. The state seldom lasted more than a few minutes, and admittedly it was frightening, certainly dangerous; nonetheless, she was never one to live in a cage. In many ways the dementia and its umbra of pure terror, its visceral chaos, provided the masochistic rush she craved these days—a badge of courage, the martyr's brand. The fugue hid her in its shadow, like a sheltering wing.

(D. L. Session 33)

Danni stared at the table while Dr. Green pressed a button and the wheels of the recorder began to turn. His chair creaked as he leaned back. He stated his name, Danni's name, the date and location.

—How are things this week? he said.

Danni set a slim metal tin on the table and flicked it open with her left hand. She removed a cigarette and lighted it. She used matches because she'd lost the fancy lighter Merrill got her as a birthday gift. She exhaled, shook the match dead.

—For a while, I thought I was getting better, she said in a raw voice.

—You don't think you're improving? Dr. Green said.

—Sometimes I wake up and nothing seems real; it's all a movie set, a humdrum version of *This Is Your Life!* I stare at the ceiling and can't shake this sense I'm an imposter.

—Everybody feels that way, Dr. Green said. His dark hands rested on a clipboard. His hands were creased and notched with the onset of middle age; the cuffs of his starched lab coat had gone yellow at the seams. He was married; he wore a simple ring and he never stared at her breasts. Happily married, or a consummate professional, or she was nothing special. A frosted window rose high and narrow over his shoulder like the painted window of a monastery. Pallid light shone at the corners of his angular glasses, the shiny edges of the clipboard, a piece of the bare plastic table, the sunken tiles of the floor. The tiles were dented and scratched and bumpy. Fine cracks spread like tendrils. Against the far walls were cabinets and shelves and several rickety beds with thin rails and large, black wheels.

The hospital was an ancient place and smelled of mold and sickness beneath the buckets of bleach she knew the custodians poured forth every evening. This had been a sanitarium. People with tuberculosis had gathered here to die in the long, shabby wards. Workers loaded the bodies into furnaces and burned them. There were chutes for the corpses on all of the upper floors. The doors of the chutes were made of dull, gray metal with big handles that reminded her of the handles on the flour and sugar bins in her mother's pantry.

Danni smoked and stared at the ceramic ashtray centered exactly between them, inches from a box of tissues. The ashtray was black. Cinders smoldered in its belly. The hospital was "no smoking," but that never came up during their weekly conversations. After the first session of him watching her drop the ashes into her coat pocket, the ashtray had appeared. Occasionally she tapped her cigarette against the rim of the ashtray and watched the smoke coil tighter and tighter until it imploded the way a demolished building collapses into itself after the charges go off.

Dr. Green said, —Did you take the bus or did you walk?

—Today? I walked.

Dr. Green wrote something on the clipboard with a heavy golden pen. —Good. You stopped to visit your friend at the market, I see.

Danni glanced at her cigarette where it fumed between her second and third fingers.

—Did I mention that? My Friday rounds?

—Yes. When we first met. He tapped a thick, manila folder bound in a heavy-duty rubber band. The folder contained Danni's records and transfer papers from the original admitting institute on the East Coast. Additionally, there was a collection of nearly unrecognizable photos of her in hospital gowns and bathrobes. In several shots an anonymous attendant pushed her in a wheelchair against a blurry backdrop of trees and concrete walls.

—Oh.

—You mentioned going back to work. Any progress?

—No. Merrill wants me to. She thinks I need to reintegrate professionally, that it might fix my problem, Danni said, smiling slightly as she pictured

her friend’s well-meaning harangues. Merrill spoke quickly, in the cadence of a native Bostonian who would always be a Bostonian no matter where she might find herself. A lit major, she’d also gone through an art-junkie phase during grad school, which had wrecked her first marriage and introduced her to many a disreputable character as could be found haunting the finer galleries and museums. One of said characters became ex-husband the second and engendered a profound and abiding disillusionment with the fine-arts scene entirely. Currently, she made an exemplary copy editor at a rather important monthly journal.

—What do you think?

—I liked being a scientist. I liked to study insects, liked tracking their brief, frenetic little lives. I know how important they are, how integral, essential to the ecosystem. Hell, they outnumber humans trillions to one. But, oh my, it’s so damned easy to feel like a god when you’ve got an ant twitching in your forceps. You think that’s how God feels when He’s got one of us under His thumb?

—I couldn’t say.

—Me neither. Danni dragged heavily and squinted. —Maybe I’ll sell Bibles door to door. My uncle sold encyclopedias when I was a little girl.

Dr. Green picked up the clipboard. —Well. Any episodes—fainting, dizziness, disorientation? Anything of that nature?

She smoked in silence for nearly half a minute. —I got confused about where I was the other day. She closed her eyes. The recollection of those bad moments threatened her equilibrium. —I was walking to Yang’s grocery. It’s about three blocks from the apartments. I got lost for a few minutes.

—A few minutes.

—Yeah. I wasn’t timing it, sorry.

—No, that’s fine. Go on.

—It was like before. I didn’t recognize any of the buildings. I was in a foreign city and couldn’t remember what I was doing there. Someone tried to talk to me, to help me—an old lady. But, I ran from her instead. Danni swallowed the faint bitterness, the dumb memory of nausea and terror.

—Why? Why did you run?

—Because when the fugue comes, when I get confused and forget where I am, people frighten me. Their faces don't seem real. Their faces are rubbery and inhuman. I thought the old lady was wearing a mask, that she was hiding something. So I ran. By the time I regained my senses, I was near the park. Kids were staring at me.

—Then?

—Then what? I yelled at them for staring. They took off.

—What did you want at Yang's?

—What?

—You said you were shopping. For what?

—I don't recall. Beets. Grapes. A giant zucchini. I don't know.

—You've been taking your medication, I presume. Drugs, alcohol?

—No drugs. Okay, a joint occasionally. A few shots here and there. Merrill wants to unwind on the weekends. She drinks me under the table—Johnny Walkers and Manhattans. Tequila if she's seducing one of the rugged types. Depends where we are. She'd known Merrill since forever. Historically, Danni was the strong one, the one who saw Merrill through two bad marriages, a career collapse and bouts of deep clinical depression. Funny how life tended to put the shoe on the other foot when one least expected.

—Do you visit many different places?

Danni shrugged. —I don't—oh, the Candy Apple. Harpo's. That hole-in-the-wall on Decker and Gedding, the Red Jack. All sorts of places. Merrill picks; says it's therapy.

—Sex?

Danni shook her head. —That doesn't mean I'm loyal.

—Loyal to whom?

—I've been noticing men and… I feel like I'm betraying Virgil. Soiling our memories. It's stupid, sure. Merrill thinks I'm crazy.

—What do you think?

—I try not to, Doc.

—Yet the past is with you. You carry it everywhere. Like a millstone, if you'll pardon the cliché.

Danni frowned. —I'm not sure what you mean—

—Yes, you are.

She smoked and looked away from his eyes. She'd arranged a mini gallery of snapshots of Virgil and Keith on the bureau in her bedroom, stuffed more photos in her wallet and fixed one of Keith as a baby on a keychain. She'd built a modest shrine of baseball ticket stubs, Virgil's moldy fishing hat, his car keys, though the car was long gone, business cards, cancelled checks, and torn up Christmas wrapping. It was sick.

—Memories have their place, of course, Dr. Green said. —But you've got to be careful. Live in the past too long and it consumes you. You can't use fidelity as a crutch. Not forever.

—I'm not planning on forever, Danni said.

Color and symmetry were among Danni's current preoccupations. Yellow squash, orange baby carrots, an axis of green peas on a china plate; the alignment of complementary elements surgically precise upon the starched white table-cloth—cloth white and neat as the hard white fabric of a hospital sheet.

Their apartment was a narrow box stacked high in a cylinder of similar boxes. The window sashes were blue. All of them a filmy, ephemeral blue like the dust on the wings of a blue emperor butterfly; blue over every window in every cramped room. Blue as dead salmon, blue as ice. Blue shadows darkened the edge of the table, rippled over Danni's untouched meal, its meticulously arrayed components. The vegetables glowed with subdued radioactivity. Her fingers curled around the fork; the veins in her hand ran like blue-black tributaries to her fingertips, ran like cold iron wires. Balanced on a windowsill was her ant farm, its inhabitants scurrying about the business of industry in microcosm of the looming cityscape. Merrill hated the ants and Danni expected her friend to poison them in a fit of revulsion and pique. Merrill wasn't naturally maternal and her scant reservoir of kindly nurture was readily exhausted on her housemate.

Danni set the fork upon a napkin, red gone black as sackcloth in the beautiful gloom, and moved to the terrace door, reaching automatically for her cigarettes as she went. She kept them in the left breast pocket of her jacket alongside a pack of matches from the Candy Apple.

The light that came through the glass and blue gauze was muted and heavy even at midday. Outside the sliding door was a terrace and a rail; beyond the rail, a gulf. Damp breaths of air were coarse with smog, tar, and pigeon shit. Eight stories yawned below the wobbly terrace to the dark brick square. Ninety-six feet to the fountain, the flagpole, two rusty benches, and Piccolo Street where winos with homemade drums, harmonicas, and flutes composed their symphonies and dirges.

Danni smoked on the terrace to keep the peace with Merrill, straight-edge Merrill, whose poison of choice was Zinfandel and fast men in nice suits, rather than tobacco. Danni smoked Turkish cigarettes that came in a tin she bought at the wharf market from a Nepalese expat named Mahan. Mahan sold coffee too, in shiny black packages; and decorative knives with tassels depending from brass handles.

Danni leaned on the swaying rail and lighted the next to the last cigarette in her tin and smoked as the sky clotted between the gaps of rooftops, the copses of wires and antennas, the static snarl of uprooted birds like black bits of paper ash turning in the Pacific breeze. A man stopped in the middle of the crosswalk. He craned his neck to seek her out from amidst the jigsaw of fire escapes and balconies. He waved and then turned away and crossed the street with an unmistakably familiar stride, and was gone.

When her cigarette was done, she flicked the butt into the empty planter, one of several terra cotta pots piled around the corroding barbeque. She lighted her remaining cigarette and smoked it slowly, made it last until the sky went opaque and the city lights began to float here and there in the murk, bubbles of iridescent gas rising against the leaden tide of night. Then she went inside and sat very still while her colony of ants scrabbled in the dark.

(D. L. Session 33)

Danni's cigarette was out; the tin empty. She began to fidget. —Do you believe in ghosts, Doctor?

—Absolutely. Dr. Green knocked his ring on the table and gestured at the hoary walls. —Look around. Haunted, I'd say.

—Really?

Dr. Green seemed quite serious. He set aside the clipboard, distancing himself from the record. —Why not. My grandfather was a missionary. He lived in the Congo for several years, set up a clinic out there. Everybody believed in ghosts—including my grandfather. There was no choice.

Danni laughed. —Well, it's settled. I'm a faithless bitch. And I'm being haunted as just desserts.

—Why do you say that?

—I went home with this guy a few weeks ago. Nice guy, a graphic designer. I was pretty drunk and he was pretty persuasive.

Dr. Green plucked a pack of cigarettes from the inside pocket of his white coat, shook one loose and handed it to her. They leaned toward one another, across the table, and he lighted her cigarette with a silvery Zippo.

—Nothing happened, she said. —It was very innocent, actually.

But that was a lie by omission, was it not? What would the good doctor think of her if she confessed her impulses to grasp a man, any man, as a point of fact, and throw him down and fuck him senseless, and refrained only because she was too frightened of the possibilities? Her cheeks stung and she exhaled fiercely to conceal her shame.

—We had some drinks and called it a night. I still felt bad, dirty, somehow. Riding the bus home, I saw Virgil. It wasn't him; he had Virgil's build and kind of slouched, holding onto one of those straps. Didn't even come close once I got a decent look at him. But for a second, my heart froze. Danni lifted her gaze from the ashtray. —Time for more pills, huh?

—Well, a case of mistaken identity doesn't qualify as a delusion.

Danni smiled darkly.

—You didn't get on the plane and you lived. Simple. Dr. Green spoke with supreme confidence.

—Is it? Simple, I mean.

—Have you experienced more of these episodes—mistaking strangers for Virgil? Or your son?

—Yeah. The man on the bus, that tepid phantom of her husband, had been the fifth incident of mistaken identity during the previous three weeks. The incidents were growing frequent; each apparition more convincing than the last. Then there were the items she'd occasionally found around the apartment—Virgil's lost wedding ring gleaming at the bottom of a pitcher of water; a trail of dried rose petals leading from the bathroom to her bed; one of Keith's crayon masterpieces fixed by magnet on the refrigerator; each of these artifacts ephemeral as dew, transitory as drifting spider thread; they dissolved and left no traces of their existence. That very morning she'd glimpsed Virgil's bomber jacket slung over the back of a chair. A sunbeam illuminated it momentarily, dispersed it amongst the moving shadows of clouds and undulating curtains.

—Why didn't you mention this sooner?

—It didn't scare me before.

—There are many possibilities. I hazard what we're dealing with is survivor's guilt, Dr. Green said. —This guilt is a perfectly normal aspect of the grieving process.

Dr. Green had never brought up the guilt association before, but she always knew it lurked in the wings, waiting to be sprung in the third act. The books all talked about it. Danni made a noise of disgust and rolled her eyes to hide the sudden urge to cry.

—Go on, Dr. Green said.

Danni pretended to rub smoke from her eye. —There isn't any more.

—Certainly there is. There's always another rock to look beneath. Why don't you tell me about the vineyards. Does this have anything to do with the *Lagerstätte?*

She opened her mouth and closed it. She stared, her fear and anger tightening screws within the pit of her stomach. —You've spoken to Merrill? Goddamn her.

—She hoped you'd get around to it, eventually. But you haven't and it seems important. Don't worry—she volunteered the information. Of course I would never reveal the nature of our conversations. Trust in that.

—It's not a good thing to talk about, Danni said. —I stopped thinking about it.

—Why?

She regarded her cigarette. Norma, poor departed Norma whispered in her ear, *Do you want to press your eye against the keyhole of a secret room? Do you want to see where the elephants have gone to die?*

—Because there are some things you can't take back. Shake hands with an ineffable enigma and it knows you. It has you, if it wants.

Dr. Green waited, his hand poised over a brown folder she hadn't noticed before. The folder was stamped in red block letters she couldn't quite read, although she suspected asylum was at least a portion.

—I wish to understand, he said. —We're not going anywhere.

—Fuck it, she said. A sense of terrible satisfaction and relief caused her to smile again. —Confession is good for the soul, right?

In the middle of dressing to meet Merrill at the market by the wharf when she got off work, Danni opened the closet and inhaled a whiff of damp, moldering air and then screamed into her fist. Several withered corpses hung from the rack amid her cheery blouses and conservative suit jackets. They were scarcely more than yellowed sacks of skin. None of the desiccated, sagging faces were recognizable; the shade and texture of cured squash, each was further distorted by warps and wrinkles of dry-cleaning bags. She recoiled and sat on the bed and chewed her fingers until a passing cloud blocked the sun and the closet went dark.

Eventually she washed her hands and face in the bathroom sink, staring into the mirror at her pale, maniacal simulacrum. She skipped makeup and stumbled from the apartment to the cramped, dingy lift that dropped her into a shabby foyer with its rows of tarnished mailbox slots checkering the walls, its low, grubby light fixtures, a stained carpet, and the sweet-and-sour

odor of sweat and stagnant air. She stumbled through the security doors into the brighter world.

The fugue descended.

Danni was walking from somewhere to somewhere else; she'd closed her eyes against the glare and her insides turned upside down. Her eyes flew open and she reeled, utterly lost. Shadow people moved around her, bumped her with their hard elbows and swinging hips; an angry man in brown tweed lectured his daughter and the girl protested. They buzzed like flies. Their miserable faces blurred together, lit by some internal phosphorous. Danni swallowed, crushed into herself with a force akin to claustrophobia, and focused on her watch, a cheap windup model that glowed in the dark. Its numerals meant nothing, but she tracked the needle as it swept a perfect circle while the world spun around her. The passage, an indoor-outdoor avenue of sorts. Market stalls flanked the causeway, shelves and timber beams twined with streamers and beads, hemp rope and tie-dye shirts and pennants. Light fell through cracks in the overhead pavilion. The enclosure reeked of fresh salmon, salt water, sawdust, and the compacted scent of perfumed flesh.

—*Danni*. Here was an intelligible voice amid the squeal and squelch. Danni lifted her head and tried to focus.

—*We miss you*, Virgil said. He stood several feet away, gleaming like polished ivory.

—What? Danni said, thinking his face was the only face not changing shape like the flowery crystals in a kaleidoscope. —What did you say?

—*Come home*. It was apparent that this man wasn't Virgil, although in this particular light the eyes were similar, and he drawled. Virgil grew up in South Carolina, spent his adult life trying to bury that drawl and eventually it only emerged when he was exhausted or angry. The stranger winked at her and continued along the boardwalk. Beneath an Egyptian cotton shirt, his back was almost as muscular as Virgil's. But, no.

Danni turned away into the bright, jostling throng. Someone took her elbow. She yelped and wrenched away and nearly fell.

—Honey, you okay? The jumble of insectoid eyes, lips, and bouffant hair coalesced into Merrill's stern face. Merrill wore white-rimmed sunglasses

that complemented her vanilla dress with its wide shoulders and brass buttons, and her elegant vanilla gloves. Her thin nose peeled with sunburn.
—Danni, are you all right?

—Yeah. Danni wiped her mouth.

—The hell you are. C'mon. Merrill led her away from the moving press to a small open square and seated her in a wooden chair in the shadow of a parasol. The square hosted a half-dozen vendors and several tables of squawking children, overheated parents with flushed cheeks, and senior citizens in pastel running suits. Merrill bought soft ice cream in tiny plastic dishes and they sat in the shade and ate the ice cream while the sun dipped below the rooflines. The vendors began taking down the signs and packing it in for the day.

—Okay, okay. I feel better. Danni's hands had stopped shaking.

—You do look a little better. Know where you are?

—The market. Danni wanted a cigarette. —Oh, damn it, she said.

—Here, sweetie. Merrill drew two containers of Mahan's foreign cigarettes from her purse and slid them across the table, mimicking a spy in one of those '70s thrillers.

—Thanks, Danni said as she got a cigarette burning. She dragged frantically, left hand cupped to her mouth so the escaping smoke boiled and foamed between her fingers like dry ice vapors. Nobody said anything despite the no smoking signs posted on the gate.

—Hey, what kind of bug is that? Merrill intently regarded a beetle hugging the warmth of a wooden plank near their feet.

—It's a beetle.

—How observant. But what kind?

—I don't know.

—What? You don't know?

—I don't know. I don't really care, either.

—Oh, please.

—Fine. Danni leaned forward until her eyeballs were scant inches above the motionless insect. —Hmm. I'd say a *Spurious exoticus minor*, closely

related to, but not to be confused with, the *Spurious eroticus major*. Yep.

Merrill stared at the beetle, then Danni. She took Danni's hand and gently squeezed. —You fucking fraud. Let's go get liquored up, hey?

—Hey-hey.

(D. L. Session 33)

Dr. Green's glasses were opaque as quartz.

—The *Lagerstätte*. Elucidate, if you will.

—A naturalist's wet dream. Ask Norma Fitzwater and Leslie Runyon, Danni said and chuckled wryly. —When Merrill originally brought me here to Cali, she made me join a support group. That was about, what? A year ago, give or take. Kind of a twelve-step program for wannabe suicides. I quit after a few visits. Group therapy isn't my style and the counselor was a royal prick. Before I left, I became friends with Norma, a drug addict and perennial house guest of the state penitentiary before she snagged a wealthy husband. Marrying rich wasn't a cure for everything, though. She claimed to have tried to off herself five or six times, made it sound like an extreme sport.

—A fascinating woman. She was pals with Leslie, a widow like me. Leslie's husband and brother fell off a glacier in Alaska. I didn't like her much. Too creepy for polite company. Unfortunately, Norma had a mother-hen complex, so there was no getting rid of her. Anyway, it wasn't much to write home about. We went to lunch once a week, watched a couple of films, commiserated about our shitty luck. Summer camp stuff.

—You speak of Norma in the past tense. I gather she eventually ended her life, Dr. Green said.

—Oh, yes. She made good on that. Jumped off a hotel roof in the Tenderloin. Left a note to the effect that she and Leslie couldn't face the music anymore. The cops, brilliant as they are, concluded Norma made a suicide pact with Leslie. Leslie's corpse hasn't surfaced yet. The cops figure she's at the bottom of the bay, or moldering in a wooded gully. I doubt that's what happened though.

—You suspect she's alive.

—No, Leslie's dead under mysterious and messy circumstances. It got leaked to the press that the cops found evidence of foul play at her home. There was blood or something on her sheets. They say it dried in the shape of a person curled in the fetal position. They compared it to the flash shadows of victims in Hiroshima. This was deeper, as if the body had been pressed hard into the mattress. The only remains were her watch, her diaphragm, her *fillings*, for Christ's sake, stuck to the coagulate that got left behind like afterbirth. Sure, it's bullshit, urban legend fodder. There were some photos in the *Gazette*, some speculation amongst our sorry little circle of neurotics and manic depressives.

—Very unpleasant, but, fortunately, equally improbable.

Danni shrugged. —Here's the thing, though. Norma predicted everything. A month before she killed herself, she let me in on a secret. Her friend Leslie, the creepy lady, had been seeing Bobby. He visited her nightly, begged her to come away with him. And Leslie planned to.

—Her husband, Dr. Green said. —The one who died in Alaska.

—The same. Trust me, I laughed, a little nervously, at this news. I wasn't sure whether to humor Norma or get the hell away from her. We were sitting in a classy restaurant, surrounded by execs in silk ties and Armani suits. Like I said, Norma was loaded. She married into a nice Sicilian family; her husband was in the import-export business, if you get my drift. Beat the hell out of her, though; definitely contributed to her low self-esteem. Right in the middle of our luncheon, between the lobster tails and the éclairs, she leaned over and confided this thing with Leslie and her deceased husband. The ghostly lover.

Dr. Green passed Danni another cigarette. He lighted one of his own and studied her through the blue exhaust. Danni wondered if he wanted a drink as badly as she did.

—How did you react to this information? Dr. Green said.

—I stayed cool, feigned indifference. It wasn't difficult; I was doped to the eyeballs most of the time. Norma claimed there exists a certain quality of grief, so utterly profound, so tragically pure, that it resounds and resonates above and below. A living, bleeding echo. It's the key to a kind of limbo.

—The *Lagerstätte*. Dr. Green licked his thumb and sorted through the papers in the brown folder. —As in the Burgess Shale, the La Brea Tar Pits. Were your friends amateur paleontologists?

—*Lagerstätten* are “resting places” in the Deutsch, and I think that’s what the women meant.

—Fascinating choice of mythos.

—People do whatever it takes to cope. Drugs, kamikaze sex, religion, anything. In naming, we seek to order the incomprehensible, yes?

—True.

—Norma pulled this weird piece of jagged, gray rock from her purse. Not rock—a petrified bone shard. A fang or a long, wicked rib splinter. Supposedly human. I could tell it was *old*; it reminded me of all those fossils of trilobites I used to play with. It radiated an aura of antiquity, like it had survived a shift of deep geological time. Norma got it from Leslie and Leslie had gotten it from someone else; Norma claimed to have no idea who, although I suspect she was lying; there was definitely a certain slyness in her eyes. For all I know, it’s osmosis. She pricked her finger on the shard and gestured at the blood that oozed on her plate. Danni shivered and clenched her left hand. —The scene was surreal. Norma said: *Grief is blood, Danni. Blood is the living path to everywhere. Blood opens the way*. She said if I offered myself to the *Lagerstätte*, Virgil would come to me and take me into the house of dreams. But I wanted to know whether it would really be him and not… an imitation. She said, *Does it matter?* My skin crawled as if I were waking from a long sleep to something awful, something my primal self recognized and feared. Like fire.

—You believe the bone was human.

—I don’t know. Norma insisted I accept it as a gift from her and Leslie. I really didn’t want to, but the look on her face, it was intense.

—Where did it come from? The bone.

—The *Lagerstätte*.

—Of course. What did you do?

Danni looked down at her hands, the left with its jagged white scar in the meat and muscle of her palm, and deeper into the darkness of the earth. —

The same as Leslie. I called them.

—You called them. Virgil and Keith.

—Yes. I didn't plan to go through with it. I got drunk, and when I'm like that, my thoughts get kind of screwy. I don't act in character.

—Oh. Dr. Green thought that over. —When you say called, what exactly do you mean?

She shrugged and flicked ashes into the ashtray. Even though Dr. Green had been there the morning they stitched the wound, she guarded the secret of its origin with a zeal bordering on pathological.

Danni had brought the weird bone to the apartment. Once alone, she drank the better half of a bottle of Maker's Mark and then sliced her palm with the sharp edge of the bone and made a doorway in blood. She slathered a vertical seam, a demarcation between her existence and the abyss, in the plaster wall at the foot of her bed. She smeared Virgil and Keith's initials and sent a little prayer into the night. In a small clay pot she'd bought at a market, she shredded her identification, her (mostly defunct) credit cards, her social security card, a lock of her hair, and burned the works with the tallow of a lamb. Then, in the smoke and shadows, she finished getting drunk off her ass and promptly blacked out.

Merrill wasn't happy; Danni had bled like the proverbial stuck pig, soaked through the sheets into the mattress. Merrill decided her friend had horribly botched another run for the Pearly Gates. She had brought Danni to the hospital for a bunch of stitches and introduced her to Dr. Green. Of course Danni didn't admit another suicide attempt. She doubted her conducting a black-magic ritual would help matters either. She said nothing, simply agreed to return for sessions with the good doctor. He was blandly pleasant, eminently nonthreatening. She didn't think he could help, but that wasn't the point. The point was to please Merrill and Merrill insisted on the visits.

Back home, Merrill confiscated the bone, the ritual fetish, and threw it in the trash. Later, she tried like hell to scrub the stain. In the end she gave up and painted the whole room blue.

A couple days after that particular bit of excitement, Danni found the bone at the bottom of her sock drawer. It glistened with a cruel, lusterless intensity. Like the monkey's paw, it had returned and that didn't surprise

her. She folded it into a kerchief and locked it in a jewelry box she'd kept since first grade.

All these months gone by, Danni remained silent on the subject.

Finally, Dr. Green sighed.—Is that when you began seeing Virgil in the faces of strangers? These doppelgängers? He smoked his cigarette with the joyless concentration of a prisoner facing a firing squad. It was obvious from his expression that the meter had rolled back to zero.

—No, not right away. Nothing happened, Danni said. —Nothing ever does, at first.

—No, I suppose not. Tell me about the vineyard. What happened there?

—I… I got lost.

—That's where all this really begins, isn't it? The fugue, perhaps other things.

Danni gritted her teeth. She thought of elephants and graveyards. Dr. Green was right, in his own smug way. Six weeks after Danni sliced her hand, Merrill took her for a daytrip to the beach. Merrill rented a convertible and made a picnic. It was nice; possibly the first time Danni felt human since the accident; the first time she'd wanted to do anything besides mope in the apartment and play depressing music.

After some discussion, they chose Bolton Park, a lovely stretch of coastline way out past Kingwood. The area was foreign to Danni, so she bought a road map pamphlet at a gas station. The brochure listed a bunch of touristy places. Windsurfers and birdwatchers favored the area, but the guide warned of dangerous riptides. The women had no intention of swimming; they stayed near a cluster of great big rocks at the north end of the beach—below the cliff with the steps that led up to the posh houses; the summer homes of movie stars and advertising executives; the beautiful people.

On the way home, Danni asked if they might stop at Kirkston Vineyards. It was a hole-in-the-wall, only briefly listed in the guidebook. There were no pictures. They drove in circles for an hour tracking the place down—Kirkston was off the beaten path; a village of sorts. There was a gift shop and an inn, and a few antique houses. The winery was fairly large and

charming in a rustic fashion, and that essentially summed up the entire place.

Danni thought it was a cute setup; Merrill was bored stiff and did what she always did when she'd grown weary of a situation—she flirted like mad with one of the tour guides. Pretty soon, she disappeared with the guy on a private tour.

There were twenty or thirty people in the tour group—a bunch of elderly folks who'd arrived on a bus and a few couples pretending they were in Europe. After Danni lost Merrill in the crowd, she went outside to explore until her friend surfaced again.

Perhaps fifty yards from the winery steps, Virgil waited in the lengthening shadows of a cedar grove. That was the first of the phantoms. Too far away for positive identification, his face was a white smudge. He hesitated and regarded her over his shoulder before he ducked into the undergrowth. She knew it was impossible, knew that it was madness, or worse, and went after him, anyway.

Deeper into the grounds she encountered crumbled walls of a ruined garden hidden under a bower of willow trees and honeysuckle vines. She passed through a massive marble archway, so thick with sap it had blackened like a smoke stack. Inside was a sunken area and a clogged fountain decorated with cherubs and gargoyles. There were scattered benches made of stone slabs, and piles of rubble overrun by creepers and moss. Water pooled throughout the garden, mostly covered by algae and scum; mosquito larvae squirmed beneath drowned leaves. Ridges of broken stone and mortar petrified in the slop and slime of that boggy soil and made waist-high calculi amongst the freestanding masonry.

Her hand throbbed with a sudden, magnificent stab of pain. She hissed through her teeth. The freshly knitted, pink slash, her Freudian scar, had split and blood seeped so copiously her head swam. She ripped the sleeve off her blouse and made a hasty tourniquet. A grim, sullen quiet drifted in; a blizzard of silence. The bees weren't buzzing and the shadows in the trees waxed red and gold as the light decayed.

Virgil stepped from behind stalagmites of fallen stone, maybe thirty feet away. She knew with every fiber of her being that this was a fake, a body

double, and yet she wanted nothing more than to hurl herself into his arms. Up until that moment, she didn't realize how much she'd missed him, how achingly final her loneliness had become.

Her glance fell upon a gleaming wedge of stone where it thrust from the water like a dinosaur's tooth, and as shapes within shapes became apparent, she understood this wasn't a garden. It was a graveyard.

Virgil opened his arms—

—I'm not comfortable talking about this, Danni said. —Let's move on.

August 9, 2006

Friday was karaoke night at the Candy Apple.

In the golden days of her previous life, Danni had a battalion of friends and colleagues with whom to attend the various academic functions and cocktail socials as required by her professional affiliation with a famous East Coast university. Barhopping had seldom been the excursion of choice.

Tonight, a continent and several light-years removed from such circumstances, she nursed an overly strong margarita, while up on the stage a couple of drunken women with big hair and smeared makeup stumbled through that old Kenny Rogers standby, "Ruby, Don't Take Your Love to Town." The fake redhead was a receptionist named Sheila, and her blonde partner, Delores, a vice president of human resources. Both of them worked at Merrill's literary magazine and they were partying off their second and third divorces respectively.

Danni wasn't drunk, although mixing her medication with alcohol wasn't helping matters; her nose had begun to tingle and her sensibilities were definitely sliding toward the nihilistic side. Also, she seemed to be hallucinating again. She'd spotted two Virgil look-alikes between walking through the door and her third margarita; that was a record, so far. She hadn't noticed either of the men enter the lounge, they simply appeared.

One of the mystery men sat amongst a group of happily chattering yuppie kids; he'd worn a sweater and parted his hair exactly like her husband used to before an important interview or presentation. The brow was wrong

though, and the smile way off. He established eye contact and his gaze made her prickle all over because this simulacrum was so very authentic; if not for the plastic sheen and the unwholesome smile, he was the man she'd looked at across the breakfast table for a dozen years. Eventually he stood and wandered away from his friends and disappeared through the front door into the night. None of the kids seemed to miss him.

The second guy sat alone at the far end of the bar; he was much closer to the authentic thing; he had the nose, the jaw, even the loose way of draping his hands over his knees. However, this one was a bit too rawboned to pass as *her* Virgil; his teeth too large, his arms too long. He stared across the room, too-dark eyes fastened on her face and she looked away and by the time she glanced up again he was gone.

She checked to see if Merrill noticed the Virgil impersonators. Merrill blithely sipped her Corona and flirted with a couple lawyer types at the adjoining table. The suits kept company with a voluptuous woman who was growing long in the tooth and had piled on enough compensatory eye shadow and lipstick to host her own talk show. The woman sulked and shot dangerous glares at Merrill. Merrill smirked coyly and touched the closest suit on the arm.

Danni lighted a cigarette and tried to keep her expression neutral while her pulse fluttered and she scanned the room with the corners of her eyes like a trapped bird. Should she call Dr. Green in the morning? Was he even in the office on weekends? What color would the new pills be?

Presently, the late dinner and theater crowd arrived en masse and the lounge became packed. The temperature immediately shot up ten degrees and the resultant din of several dozen competing conversations drowned all but shouts. Merrill had recruited the lawyers (who turned out to be an insurance claims investigator and a CPA) Ned and Thomas, and their miffed associate Glenna (a court clerk), to join the group and migrate to another, hopefully more peaceful watering hole.

They shambled through neon-washed night, a noisy, truncated herd of quasi-strangers, arms locked for purchase against the mist-slick sidewalks. Danni found herself squashed between Glenna and Ned the Investigator. Ned grasped her waist in a slack, yet vaguely proprietary fashion; his hand

was soft with sweat, his paunchy face made more uncomely with livid blotches and the avaricious expression of a drowsy predator. His shirt reeked so powerfully of whiskey it might've been doused in the stuff.

Merrill pulled them to a succession of bars and nightclubs and all-night bistros. Somebody handed Danni a beer as they milled in the vaulted entrance of an Irish pub and she drank it like tap water, not really tasting it, and her ears hurt and the evening rapidly devolved into a tangle of raucous music and smoke that reflected the fluorescent lights like coke-blacked miners lamps, and at last a cool, humid darkness shattered by headlights and the sulfurous orange glow of angry clouds.

By her haphazard count, she glimpsed in excess of fifty incarnations of Virgil. Several at the tavern, solitary men mostly submerged in the recessed booths, observing her with stony diffidence through beer steins and shot glasses; a dozen more scattered along the boulevard, listless nomads whose eyes slid around, not quite touching anything. When a city bus grumbled past, every passenger's head swiveled in unison beneath the repeating flare of dome lights. Every face pressed against the dirty windows belonged to him. Their lifelike masks bulged and contorted with inconsolable longing.

Ned escorted her to his place, a warehouse apartment in a row of identical warehouses between the harbor and the railroad tracks. The building had been converted to a munitions factory during the Second World War, then housing in the latter '60s. It stood black and gritty; its greasy windows sucked in the feeble illumination of the lonely beacons of passing boats and the occasional car.

They took a clanking cargo elevator to the top, the penthouse, as Ned laughingly referred to his apartment. The elevator was a box encased in grates that exposed the inner organs of the shaft and the dark tunnels of passing floors. It could've easily hoisted a baby grand piano. Danni pressed her cheek to vibrating metal and shut her eyes tight against vertigo and the canteen-like slosh of too many beers in her stomach.

Ned's apartment was sparsely furnished and remained mostly in gloom even after he turned on the floor lamp and went to fix nightcaps. Danni collapsed onto the corner of a couch abridging the shallow nimbus of light and stared raptly at her bone-white hand curled into the black leather. Neil

Diamond crooned from velvet speakers. Ned said something about his record collection and, faintly, ice cracked from its tray and clinked in glass with the resonance of a tuning fork.

Danni's hand shivered as if it might double and divide. She was cold now, in the sticky hot apartment, and her thighs trembled. Ned slipped a drink into her hand and placed his own hand on her shoulder, splayed his soft fingers on her collar, traced her collar bone with his moist fingertip. Danni flinched and poured gin down her throat until Ned took the glass and began to nuzzle her ear, his teeth clicking against the pearl stud, his overheated breath like smoldering creosote and kerosene, and as he tugged at her blouse strap, she began to cry. Ned lurched above her and his hands were busy with his belt and pants, and these fell around his ankles and his loafers. He made a fist in a mass of her hair and yanked her face against his groin; his linen shirttails fell across Danni's shoulders and he bulled himself into her gasping mouth. She gagged, overwhelmed by the ripeness of sweat and whiskey and urine, the rank humidity, the bruising insistence of him, and she convulsed, arms flailing in epileptic spasms, and vomited. Ned's hips pumped for several seconds and then his brain caught up with current events and he cried out in dismay and disgust and nearly capsized the couch as he scrambled away from her and a caramel gush of half-digested cocktail shrimp and alcohol.

Danni dragged herself from the couch and groped for the door. The door was locked with a bolt and chain and she battered at these, sobbing and choking. Ned's curses were muffled by a thin partition and the low thunder of water sluicing through corroded pipes. She flung open the door and was instantly lost in a cavernous hall that telescoped madly. The door behind her was a cave mouth, the windows were holes, were burrows. She toppled down a flight of stairs.

Danni lay crumpled, damp concrete wedged against the small of her back and pinching the back of her legs. Ghostly radiance cast shadows upon the piebald walls of the narrow staircase and rendered the scrawls of graffiti into fragmented hieroglyphics. Copper and salt filled her mouth. Her head was thick and spongy and when she moved it, little comets shot through her vision. A moth jerked in zigzags near her face, jittering upward at frantic angles toward a naked bulb. The bulb was brown and black with dust and

cigarette smoke. A solid shadow detached from the gloom of the landing; a slight, pitchy silhouette that wavered at the edges like gasoline fumes.

Mommy? A small voice echoed, familiar and strange, the voice of a child or a castrato and it plucked at her insides, sent tremors through her.

—Oh, God, she said, and vomited again, spilling herself against the rough surface of the wall. The figure became two, then four and a pack of childlike shapes assembled on the landing. The pallid corona of the brown bulb dimmed. She rolled away, onto her belly, and began to crawl…

August 10, 2006

The police located Danni semiconscious in the alley behind the warehouse apartments. She didn't understand much of what they said and she couldn't muster the resolve to volunteer the details of her evening's escapades. Merrill rode with her in the ambulance to the emergency room where, following a two-hour wait, a haggard surgeon determined Danni suffered from a number of nasty contusions, minor lacerations, and a punctured tongue. No concussion, however. He punched ten staples into her scalp, handed over a prescription for painkillers, and sent her home with an admonishment to return in twelve hours for observation.

After they'd settled safe and sound at the apartment, Merrill wrapped Danni in a blanket and boiled a pot of green tea. Lately, Merrill was into feng shui and Chinese herbal remedies. It wasn't quite dawn and so they sat in the shadows in the living room. There were no recriminations, although Merrill lapsed into a palpable funk; hers was the grim expression of guilt and helplessness attendant to her perceived breach of guardianship. Danni patted her hand and drifted off to sleep.

When Danni came to again, it was early afternoon and Merrill was in the kitchen banging pots. Over bowls of hot noodle soup Merrill explained she'd called in sick for a couple days. She thought they should get Danni's skull checked for dents and rent some movies and lie around with a bowl of popcorn and do essentially nothing. Tomorrow might be a good day to go window shopping for an Asian print to mount in their pitifully barren entryway.

Merrill summoned a cab. The rain came in sheets against the windows of the moving car and Danni dozed to the thud of the wipers, trying to ignore the driver's eyes upon her from the rearview. He looked unlike the fuzzy headshot on his license fixed to the visor. In the photo his features were burnt teak and warped by the deformation of aging plastic.

They arrived at the hospital and signed in and went into the bowels of the grand old beast to radiology. A woman in a white jacket injected dye into Danni's leg and loaded her into a shiny, cold machine the girth of a bread truck and ordered her to keep her head still. The technician's voice buzzed through a hidden transmitter, repulsively intimate as if a fly had crawled into her ear canal. When the rubber jackhammers started in on the steel shell, she closed her eyes and saw Virgil and Keith waving to her from the convex windows of the plane. The propeller spun so slowly she could track its revolutions.

—The doctor says they're negative. The technician held photographic plates of Danni's brain against a softly flickering pane of light. —See? No problems at all.

The crimson seam dried black on the bedroom wall. The band of black acid eating plaster until the wall swung open on smooth, silent hinges. Red darkness pulsed in the rift. White leaves crumbled and sank, each one a lost face. A shadow slowly shaped itself into human form. The shadow man regarded her, his hand extended, approaching her without moving his shadow legs.

Merrill thanked the woman in the clipped manner she reserved for those who provoked her distaste, and put a protective arm over Danni's shoulders. Danni had taken an extra dose of tranquilizers to sand the rough edges. Reality was a taffy pull.

Pour out your blood and they'll come back to you, Norma said, and stuck her bleeding finger into her mouth. Her eyes were cold and dark as the eyes of a carrion bird. Bobby and Leslie coupled on a squeaking bed. Their frantic rhythm gradually slowed and they began to melt and merge until their flesh rendered to a sticky puddle of oil and fat and patches of hair. The forensics photographers came, clicking and whirring, eyes deader than the lenses of their cameras. They smoked cigarettes in the hallway and chatted

with the plainclothes about baseball and who was getting pussy and who wasn't; everybody had sashimi for lunch, noodles for supper, and took work home and drank too much. Leslie curdled in the sheets and her parents were long gone, so she was already most of the way to being reduced to a serial number and forgotten in a cardboard box in a storeroom. Except, Leslie stood in a doorway in the grimy bulk of a nameless building. She stood, hip-shot and half-silhouetted, naked and lovely as a Botticelli nude. Disembodied arms circled her from behind, and large, muscular hands cupped her breasts. She nodded, expressionless as a wax death masque, and stepped back into the black. The iron door closed.

Danni's brain was fine. No problems at all.

Merrill took her home and made her supper. Fried chicken; Danni's favorite from a research stint studying the migration habits of three species of arachnids at a southern institute where grits did double duty as breakfast and lunch.

Danni dozed intermittently, lulled by the staccato flashes of the television. She stirred and wiped drool from her lips, thankfully too dopey to suffer much embarrassment. Merrill helped her to bed and tucked her in and kissed her goodnight on the mouth. Danni was surprised by the warmth of her breath, her tenderness; then she was heavily asleep, floating facedown in the red darkness, the amniotic wastes of a secret world.

Merrill cooked waffles for breakfast; she claimed to have been a "champeen" hash-slinger as an undergrad, albeit Danni couldn't recall that particular detail of their shared history. Although food crumbled like cardboard on her tongue, Danni smiled gamely and cleared her plate. The fresh orange juice in the frosted glass was a mouthful of lye. Merrill had apparently jogged over to Yang's and picked up a carton the exact instant the poor fellow rolled back the metal curtains from his shop front, and Danni swallowed it and hoped she didn't drop the glass because her hand was shaking so much. The pleasant euphoria of painkillers and sedatives had drained away, usurped by a gnawing, allusive dread, a swell of self-disgust and revulsion.

The night terrors tittered and scuffled in the cracks and crannies of the tiny kitchen, whistled at her in a pitch only she and dogs could hear. Any second now, the broom closet would creak open and a ghastly figure shamble forth, licking lips riven by worms. At any moment the building would shudder and topple in an avalanche of dust and glass and shearing girders. She slumped in her chair, fixated on the chipped vase, its cargo of wilted geraniums drooping over the rim. Merrill bustled around her, tidying up with what she dryly attributed as her latent German efficiency, although her mannerisms suggested a sense of profound anxiety. When the phone chirped and it was Sheila reporting some minor emergency at the office, her agitation multiplied as she scoured her little address book for someone to watch over Danni for a few hours.

Danni told her to go, she'd be okay—maybe watch a soap and take a nap. She promised to sit tight in the apartment, come what may. Appearing only slightly mollified, Merrill agreed to leave, vowing a speedy return.

Late afternoon slipped over the city, lackluster and overcast. Came the desultory honk and growl of traffic, the occasional shout, the off-tempo drumbeat from the square. Reflections of the skyline patterned a blank span of wall. Water gurgled, and the disjointed mumble of radio or television commentary came muffled from the neighboring apartments. Her eyes leaked and the shakes traveled from her hands into the large muscles of her shoulders. Her left hand ached.

A child murmured in the hallway, followed by scratching at the door. The bolt rattled. She stood and looked across the living area at the open door of the bedroom. The bedroom dilated. Piles of jagged rocks twined with coarse brown seaweed instead of the bed, the dresser, her unseemly stacks of magazines. A figure stirred amid the weird rocks and unfolded at the hips with the horrible alacrity of a tarantula. *You filthy whore*. She groaned and hooked the door with her ankle and kicked it shut.

Danni went to the kitchen and slid a carving knife from its wooden block. She walked to the bathroom and turned on the shower. Everything seemed too shiny, except the knife. The knife hung loosely in her fingers; its blade was dark and pitted. She stripped her robe and stepped into the shower and drew the curtain. Steam began to fill the room. Hot water beat against the

back of her neck, her spine and buttocks as she rested her forehead against the tiles.

What have you done? You filthy bitch. She couldn't discern whether that accusing whisper had bubbled from her brain, or trickled in with the swirling steam. *What have you done?* It hardly mattered now that nothing was of any substance, of any importance besides the knife. Her hand throbbed as the scar separated along its seam. Blood and water swirled down the drain.

Danni. The floorboards settled and a tepid draft brushed her calves. She raised her head and a silhouette filled the narrow door, an incomprehensible blur through the shower curtain. Danni dropped the knife. She slid down the wall into a fetal position. Her teeth chattered, and her animal self took possession. She remembered the ocean, acres of driftwood littering a beach, Virgil's grin as he paid out the tether of a dragonhead kite they'd bought in Chinatown. She remembered the corpses hanging in her closet, and whimpered.

A hand pressed against the translucent fabric, dimpled it inward, fingers spread. The hand squelched on the curtain. Blood ran from its palm and slithered in descending ladders.

—Oh, Danni said. Blearily, through a haze of tears and steam, she reached up and pressed her bloody left hand against the curtain, locked palms with the apparition, giddily cognizant this was a gruesome parody of the star-crossed lovers who kiss through glass. —Virgil, she said, chest hitching with sobs.

—You don't have to go, Merrill said, and dragged the curtain aside. She too wept, and nearly fell into the tub as she embraced Danni and the water soaked her clothes, and quantities of blood spilled between them, and Danni saw her friend had found the fetish bone, because there it was, in a black slick on the floor, trailing a spray of droplets like a nosebleed. —You can stay with me. Please stay, Merrill said. She stroked Danni's hair, hugged her as if to keep her from floating away with the steam as it condensed on the mirror, the small window, and slowly evaporated.

May 6, 2006

(D. L. Session 33)

—Danni, do you read the newspapers? Watch the news? Dr. Green said this carefully, giving weight to the question.

—Sure, sometimes.

—The police recovered her body months ago. He removed a newspaper clipping from the folder and pushed it toward her.

—Who? Danni did not look at the clipping.

—Leslie Runyon. An anonymous tip led the police to a landfill. She'd been wrapped in a tarp and buried in a heap of trash. Death by suffocation, according to the coroner. You really don't remember.

Danni shook her head. —No. I haven't heard anything like that.

—Do you think I'm lying?

—Do you think I'm a paranoid delusional?

—Keep talking and I'll get back to you on that, he said, and smiled. —What happened at the vineyard, Danni? When they found you, you were quite a mess, according to the reports.

—Yeah. Quite a mess, Danni said. She closed her eyes and fell back into herself, fell down the black mineshaft into the memory of the garden, the *Lagerstätte*.

Virgil waited to embrace her.

Only a graveyard, an open charnel, contained so much death. The rubble and masonry were actually layers of bones; a reef of calcified skeletons locked in heaps; and mummified corpses; enough withered faces to fill the backs of a thousand milk cartons, frozen twigs of arms and legs wrapped about their eternal partners. These masses of ossified humanity were cloaked in skeins of moss and hair and rotted leaves.

Norma beckoned from the territory of waking dreams. She stood upon the precipice of a rooftop. She said, Welcome to the Lagerstätte. *Welcome to the secret graveyard of the despairing and the damned. She spread her arms and pitched backward.*

Danni moaned and hugged her fist wrapped in its sopping rags. She had come unwitting, although utterly complicit in her devotion, and now stood before a terrible mystery of the world. Her knees trembled and folded.

Virgil shuttered rapidly and shifted within arm's reach. He smelled of aftershave and clove, the old, poignantly familiar scents. He also smelled of earthiness and mold, and his face began to destabilize, to buckle as packed dirt buckles under a deluge and becomes mud.

Come and sleep, he said in the rasp of leaves and dripping water. His hands bit into her shoulders and slowly, inexorably drew her against him. His chest was icy as the void, his hands and arms iron as they tightened around her and laid her down in the muck and the slime. His lips closed over hers. His tongue was pliant and fibrous and she thought of the stinking, brown rot that carpeted the deep forests. Other hands plucked at her clothes, her hair; other mouths suckled her neck, her breasts, and she thought of misshapen fungi and scurrying centipedes, the ever scrabbling ants, and how all things that squirmed in the sunless interstices crept and patiently fed.

Danni went blind, but images streamed through the snarling wires of her consciousness. *Virgil and Keith rocked in the swing on the porch of their New England home. They'd just finished playing catch in the backyard; Keith still wore his Red Sox jersey, and Virgil rolled a baseball in his fingers. The stars brightened in the lowering sky and the streetlights fizzed on, one by one. Her mother stood knee-deep in the surf, apron strings flapping in a rising wind. She held out her hands. Keith, pink and wrinkled, screamed in Danni's arms, his umbilical cord still wet. Virgil pressed his hand to a wall of glass. He mouthed, I love you, honey.*

I love you, Mommy, Keith said, his wizened infant's face tilted toward her own. Her father carefully laid out his clothes, his police uniform of twenty-six years, and climbed into the bathtub. We love you, girlie, Dad said, and stuck the barrel of his service revolver into his mouth. Oh, quitting had run in the family, was a genetic certainty given the proper set of circumstances. Mom had drowned herself in the sea, such was her grief. Her brother, he'd managed to kill himself in a police action in some foreign desert. This gravitation to self-destruction was ineluctable as her blood.

Danni thrashed upright. Dank mud sucked at her, plastered her hair and drooled from her mouth and nose. She choked for breath, hands clawing at an assailant who had vanished into the mist creeping upon the surface of the marsh. Her fingernails raked and broke against the glaciated cheek of a vaguely female corpse; a stranger made wholly inhuman by the slow, steady vise of gravity and time. Danni groaned. Somewhere, a whippoorwill began to sing.

Voices called for her through the trees; shrill and hoarse. Their shouts echoed weakly, as if from the depths of a well. These were unmistakably the voices of the living. Danni's heart thudded, galvanized by the adrenal response to her near-death experience, and, more subtly, an inchoate sense of guilt, as if she'd done something unutterably foul. She scrambled to her feet and fled.

Oily night flooded the forest. A boy cried, *Mommy, mommy!* Amid the plaintive notes of the whippoorwill. Danni floundered from the garden, scourged by terror and no small regret. By the time she found her way in the dark, came stumbling into the circle of rescue searchers and their flashlights, Danni had mostly forgotten where she'd come from or what she'd been doing there.

Danni opened her eyes to the hospital, the dour room, Dr. Green's implacable curiosity.

She said, —Can we leave it for now? Just for now. I'm tired. You have no idea.

Dr. Green removed his glasses. His eyes were bloodshot and hard, but human after all. —Danni, you're going to be fine, he said.

—Am I?

—Miles to go before we sleep, and all that jazz. But yes, I believe so. You want to open up, and that's very good. It's progress.

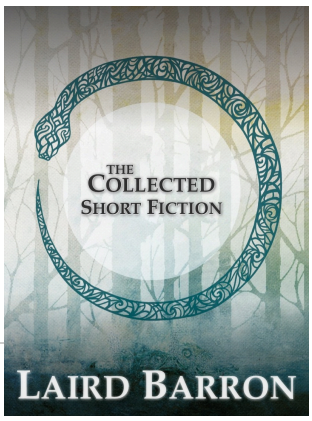
Danni smoked.

—Next week we can discuss further treatment options. There are several medicines we haven't looked at; maybe we can get you a dog. I know you live in an apartment, but service animals have been known to work

miracles. Go home and get some rest. That’s the best therapy I can recommend.

Danni inhaled the last of her cigarette and held the remnants of fire close to her heart. She ground the butt into the ashtray. She exhaled a stream of smoke and wondered if her soul, the souls of her beloved, looked anything like that. Uncertain of what to say, she said nothing. The wheels of the recorder stopped.

Occultation



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In the middle of playing a round of *Something Scary* they got sidetracked and fucked for a while. After they were done fucking, they lighted cigarettes. Then, they started drinking. Again.

—My God. Look at that, she said.

He grunted like he did when he wasn't listening.

—Hey! I'm creeped out, she said.

—By what? He balanced two shot glasses on his lap and tried to avoid spilling tequila all over the blankets. He'd swiped the tumblers from the honky-tonk across the highway where he'd also scored the X that was currently softening their skulls. The motel room was dark, the bed lumpy, and she kept kicking restlessly, and he spilled a bit regardless. He cursed and downed his in one gulp and handed her the other glass, managing not to burn her with the cigarette smoldering between his fingers.

She accepted her drink, took a deep sip and then held the glass loosely so the edge cast a faint, metallic light across her breasts. She exhaled and pointed beyond the foot of the bed to a spot on the wall above the dead television. —That, she said.

—What?

—That! Right there!

—Shit. Okay. He dragged on his cigarette, then poured another shot and strained it through his teeth, stalling. —Pretty weird.

—Yep, pretty weird is right. What *is* it?

He made a show of squinting into the gloom. —Nothing, probably. You trying to torch the place?

Ashes crumbled from her cigarette and glowed like fallen stars against the sheets. She swept them into her palm, then into the now empty glass. —It just freaks me out.

—You're easily freaked, then.

—No, I'm not. I'm the only girl in my family who watches horror movies. I don't even cover my eyes for the scary parts.

—Yeah?

—Hell yeah. I don't spook. I don't.

—After some consideration I think it's a shadow.

—That's *not* a shadow. It came out when you were doing the story thing.

—See how a little bit of light from the highway comes in under the blinds? Shadows all over the place.

—Nope. I'm telling you, it came out while you were talking.

—Oh, then it's gotta be a ghost. No other sane explanation. Wooooo-hooooo!

—Shaddup. I need another shot.

—Want this? Couple swallows at the bottom. He sloshed the bottle back and forth.

—Gimme. She snapped her fingers, then grabbed the bottle when he swung it close.

—Wait a sec, we'll solve this right now. He leaned against her, reaching across their bodies for the bedside lamp.

—No!

—Huh? What's the matter?

—Don't do it.

—I'm trying to turn on the light, not cop a feel.

—Go ahead and cop a feel, but leave the light alone, 'kay? She thumped the bottle against his arm until he retreated.

—Whatever. Jesus. Got any more cigs?

She fumbled a pack of cigarettes from the nightstand, lighted one from hers and handed it to him. —Last one, she said, crumpling the pack for

emphasis.

He slid toward his edge of the bed and slumped against the headboard and smoked in silence. A semi rumbled past on the interstate and the blinds quivered against the window frame. Outside was scrub and desert. The motel lay embedded in the implacable waste like a lunar module stranded between moon craters.

—Don’t sulk, she said.

—I’m not.

—Like hell.

—I’m not sulking.

—Then what?

—I’m looking at the wall. Maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s something else. Why can’t we turn on the light? A coyote howled somewhere not too far off. Its cry was answered and redoubled until it finally swelled into a frantic, barking cacophony that moved like a cloud across the black desert.
—Holy shit, what’s that? he said.

—Coyotes, she said. Scavenging for damned souls.

—Sounds fucking grandiose for coyotes.

—And what do you know? They’re the favored children of the carrion gods. Grandiosity is their gig.

He laughed, a little strange, a little wild, as if echoing the animal harmony.
—So, what are they doing around here? Going through a landfill?

—Maybe you drew them in earlier with your howling.

—Bullshit. They can’t hear that. All the way out in the tumbleweeds?

—Sure they can. Howl again. I dare you.

—If coyotes sound this bad, I’d hate listening to jackals. Or dingoes. Remember that news story, years ago, about the woman on the picnic with her family?

—*‘A dingo ate my baby!’* God, that’s awful. But comical in a horrible way.

—It isn’t comical in any way, honey. You’re scaring the children.

—Please. Nobody really knows what happened. The kid's mom probably offed her, you ask me.

—There's a great relief. Why do so many parents kill their kids, you think?

—Lots of reasons. Don't you want to strangle the little fuckers sometimes? Like those shits on the flight when we went to see your parents? What a mistake that was, by the way. That one girl kept kicking my seat so hard my head was bouncing. And her mom…

—Ha! It was fun watching you get so mad, though.

She didn't answer, but sat rigidly upright. She trembled.

—Honey? He rubbed her back. —What's the matter?

—Go ahead, she said. Her voice was small.

—Go ahead and what?

—Turn on the light, she said in that small voice. Her cigarette was out and the darkness gathered around them, oily and deep. Faint illumination came through the blinds like light bleeding toward the bottom of a well, a dungeon.

—*You* turn it on, he said. —You're right there.

—I can't move.

—What the hell are you talking about?

—Please. I'm too scared to move, all right? She was whining, borderline hysterical. She enjoyed being frightened, savored the visceral thrill of modulated terror, thus Something Scary, and thus the What If Game (What if a carload of rednecks started following us on a lonely road? What if somebody was sneaking around the house at night? What if I got pregnant?), and thus her compulsion to build the shadow, the discolored blotch of wallpaper, into something sinister. As was often the case with her, a mule's dose of alcohol combined with sleep deprivation rapidly contributed to the situation getting out of hand.

—Fine. He flopped across her lap and found the lamp chain with his fingertips and yanked. The chain clicked and nothing happened. He tried several times and finally gave up in disgust. Meanwhile, her left hand dug into his shoulder. Her skin was icy.

—Owww, he said, pushing toward his side, happy to get away.

—I knew it. She turned her head so her mouth was closer to his ear and she could kind of whisper. —I knew the light was going to crap out on us. We're alone in here.

—Well, I hope so. I wouldn't like to think some big hairy ax murderer was hiding under the bed.

—I already checked. She chuckled weakly and her icy talon found his bicep now, though somewhat less violently. She was almost calm again. —I looked for Anthony Perkins hiding in the bathroom, too.

—Good! Did you scout around for a peephole? The night clerk could be in the next room winding up his camera. Next thing you know, we're internet porn stars.

—That'd suck. She'd begun to slur. —Man, I hate the desert.

—You also hated Costa Rica, if I recall. Who hates Costa Rica?

—Tarantulas. Centipedes. I hate creepy crawlies.

—Who doesn't?

—Exactly! Thank you! There's a species of centipede, Venezuela, somewhere in South America, anyway; it's as long as your forearm. Eats bats. Knocks them outta the air with its venom-dripping mandibles, and bang! Bat Surprise for dinner.

—You're super drunk. I thought I had most of the tequila.

—Yep, I'm off my ass. Some cowboy bought me like eight shooters while you were in the bathroom. You were in there forever.

—Come again? he said, scandalized.

—Down, boy. He didn't grope me. He just plied me with booze on the off chance I'd let him grope me later. No biggie.

—No biggie? No biggie? Was it that stupid-looking sonofabitch in the Stetson? The guy who couldn't stop ogling your tits?

—You're describing half the bar. Who cares? I gave baby Travolta the slip and ran off with you!

—Awesome.

They lay there for a time, she playing with her lighter, grinding short, weak sparks from the wheel; he listening for the coyote chorus and keeping one eye on the weird blotch of shadow on the wall. Both of them were thinking about the story he'd half told earlier about his uncle Mo who'd done a stint with the Marines and had a weird experience during shore leave in the Philippines; the Something Scary tale that had been so sublimely interrupted.

She said, —Maybe I'm a little intimidated about the Filipino strippers. I can't pick up a pop bottle with my pussy. Or shoot ping pong balls outta there, either.

—Those girls come highly recommended, he said. —Years of specialized training.

—Sounds like your uncle sure knew his way around Filipino whorehouses.

—Wasn't just the whorehouses. Those old boys went crazy on shore leave 'cause that far-out shit was front and center in just about every bar in town. They were dumbass kids—pretty fortunate nobody got his throat slit. According to Mo, a bunch of the taxi drivers belonged to gangs and they'd cart drunk soldiers into the jungle and rob them.

—Enough about the whores and thieving taxi drivers. Get to the scary part. If there's anything more disturbing than Marines slobbering on bottles some whore has been waving around with her cooch, I wanna hear it.

—More disturbing? Uncle Mo told me one about these three guys in Nam who snuck into a leper colony to get some ass. Back then, I guess the locals put the immediate family in the colony whether they were infected or not, so the fellows figured there had to be some prime tail up for grabs.

—Ick! Moving on…

—Okay, R&R in Manila. Mo, and Lurch, a corpsman from his platoon, were whooping it up big time; they'd been drinking three days straight. Barhopping, y'know, and eventually a couple party girls latched onto them and they all headed back to this shack by the docks the guys were renting. A rickety sonofagun, third floor, sorta hanging out over the water. Long story short, Mo's in the bedroom and the girl is smoking his pole. His mind wanders and he happens to look out the window. Across the way, through the window of this other crappy house, there's a naked Filipino broad

getting her muffin dusted by some GI. Talk about symmetry, eh? It's raining like a cow pissing on a flat rock and a sash is whacking around in the wind, cutting off the view every few seconds. The broad grins over at Uncle Mo and she reaches up and covers her ears. Then she just lifts her head off her shoulders. Mo's standing there, straddle-legged and slack-jawed and the woman's head keeps on grinning at him and her lips start moving. She's laughing at him. He notices there's something coming out of her neck, like a beak, or who the fuck knows what, 'cause the shade is flapping, see. Meanwhile the other grunt is going to town on her pussy, oblivious to the fact this freak is tucking her head under her arm like a bowling ball.

—And then?

—Then nothing. End of story. Mo and the stripper went back to the main room and drank some more and blazed the night away. He came to forty-eight hours later when his platoon sergeant dumped a bucket of water on his head and kicked his ass back to the ship for the clap inspection.

—Clap inspection?

—After shore leave all the grunts had to drop their pants so an NCO could check them for VD. Heh-heh.

—What a crock of shit, she said. —That's not even scary.

—Sorry. I made the last part up. The part about Mo getting a BJ while the hooker and the other dude were getting busy across the way was true. I think. Uncle Mo lies about stuff, so you never really know.

She groaned in disgust. —Where'd you even get the idea?

—I dunno. Popped into my head while I was lying there. Figured it would get a rise outta you. He laughed and poked her arm, dropped his hand to her leg.

She pushed his hand aside. —Now that that's over. Check this out: I found something odd earlier, she said. —A bible.

—Lots of motels have bibles lying around, he said. —And Jack Chick tracts. He was studying the shadow again. —You know, that thing *does* resemble an insect. Thought it had wings earlier, but I dunno. Can't see shit in here. Wait a minute… It's a water stain. This rat hole leaks like a sieve, betcha anything.

—The bathroom wall is rotten. I was sitting on the toilet and felt a cool breeze. I could stick my fingers outside. Freezing out there.

—Peephole, he said. —For the desert cannibals. There's an abandoned atomic testing range a few dunes over. History Channel did a documentary on them. So I hear.

—I dunno about that, but what I do know is something poisonous could a crawled in any old time and made a nest, could be waiting to lay eggs in our ears when we fall asleep. If that's the case, I gotta tell you, twenty bucks a night seems like a rip-off.

He chuckled.

—Why are you laughing? she said.

—Earlier, I was pissing and noticed something a bit fucked up.

—I think you might have an enlarged prostate.

—The hell are you going on about?

—Frequent urination is a sign of an enlarged prostate. Don't you watch infomercials? They could save your life.

—Anyway. I'm taking one of my apparently frequent pisses, when I notice there's no toilet paper. Like the gentleman I am, I find another roll in the cabinet and get ready to put it on the hanger rod. All for you, snookums.

—You *are* a gentleman, she said.

—Yeah, I raised the seat and everything. I pulled the rod out and set it aside. Unfortunately, I dropped the toilet paper and it went flying out the door and I had to chase it down, wadding the unspooled paper as I went. Man, you could trace pictures with that stuff. It's like one-ply.

—The moral of the story is, shut the door when taking a piss.

—No, that's not the moral of the story. There's more. I go back just in time to watch a big-ass spider squeeze itself out of the rod and scurry into the sink. Thing had a body maybe the size of a jawbreaker; red and yellow, and fleshy, like a plum. It was so damned hefty I could see light reflecting in its eyes. Then it took off down the drain. I think it was irate I screwed with its cozy little home. He had a laugh over the scenario.

—For real? she said.

—Oh, yeah.

She thought things over for a bit. —No way in hell I'm going back in there. I'll pee behind a cactus. A jawbreaker?

—Hand to a stack of bibles, he said, wiping his eyes and visibly working to appear more solemn.

—The bible! She half climbed from bed, groped for the dresser, and after a few anxious moments came back with something heavy and black. She snicked the lighter until its flame revealed the pebbled hide of a small, thick book.

—What kind of bible is that? he said.

—Greek. Byzantine. I dunno, she said. Gilt symbols caught the flame and glistened in convoluted whorls and angular slashes; golden reflections played over the blankets, rippled across the couple's flesh. The pages were thin as white leaves and covered in script to match the cover design. Many of the pages were defiled by chocolaty fingerprints. The book smelled of cigarette musk and mothballs. It was quite patently old.

—This has got to be a collector's item. Some poor schlep forgot it here. He turned the book over in his hands, riffling the pages. No name on it… Finders-keepers.

—Hmm, I dunno…

—Dunno what?

—Whether that's a good idea.

—Billy will go apeshit over this thing. Besides, I owe him a hundred bucks.

—I don't care if Billy goes apeshit over antiquarian crap. That's what antiquarians do, right? You owe me the hundred bucks, anyway, motherfucker.

—Don't you want to know what it is?

—I already know what it is; it's a bible.

He shrugged and handed the book over. —Whatever. Do what you want. I don't care.

—Great! She tossed the book over her shoulder in the general direction of the dresser.

—Man, you really are so wasted.

—Gettin’ my second wind, boy. I’m bored.

—Go to sleep. Then you won’t be bored.

—Can’t sleep. I’m preoccupied with that spider. She’s in those rusty pipes, rubbing her claws together and plotting vengeance. Go kill her, would ya?

—You kiddin’? It’s pitch dark in there—she’d get the drop on me.

—Hmp. I’m chilly. Let’s screw.

—No thanks. I’d just whiskey dick you for half an hour and pass out.

—I see. You won’t kill a predatory bug, but you’ll club our romance like a baby seal. Swell.

—Wah, wah, he said.

It had grown steadily chillier in the room. She idly thumbed the lighter wheel and watched their breath coalesce by intermittent licks of flame. The shadow above the television had become oblong and black as the cranium of a squid. She raised her arm and the shadow seemed to bleed upward and sideways, as if avoiding the feeble nimbus of fire. —Man, why would that thing appear during your story. Maybe I only noticed it then. Right…?

—I called the shadow forth. And summoned the coyotes. Go to sleep. He rolled over and faced the opposite wall.

—Hell with this. I need a cig. Honey.

—Don’t honey me. I’m bushed. He pulled a pillow over his head.

—Fine. She flounced from the bed and promptly smacked her shin on the chair that had toppled over from the weight of her jeans and purse. —Ahh! She hopped around, cursing and fuming and finally yanked on her pants and blouse, snatched up her purse and blundered through the door into the night.

It was cold, all right. The stars were out, fierce and prehistoric. The dark matter between them seemed blacker than usual and thick as tar. She hugged herself and clattered along the boardwalk past the blank windows and the cheap doors with descending numbers to the pop and cigarette machines by the manager’s office. No bulbs glowed along the walkway, the

office was a deep, dark pit; the neon vacancy sign reared blind and black. Luckily, the vending panels oozed blurry, greenish light to guide her way. Probably the only light for miles. She disliked that thought.

She dug whiskey-soaked dollar bills and a few coins from her purse, started plugging them into the cigarette machine until it clanked and dispensed a pack of Camels. The cold almost drove her scurrying back to the room where her husband doubtless slumbered with dreams of unfiltered cigarettes dancing in his head, but not quite. She cracked the pack and got one going, determined to satisfy her craving and then hide the rest where he'd never find them. Lazy, unchivalrous bastard! Let him forage for his own smokes.

Smoke boiled in her lungs; she leaned against a post and exhaled with beatific self-satisfaction, momentarily immune to the chill. The radiance of the vending machines seeped a few yards across the gravel lot, illuminating the hood of her Volkswagen Beetle and a beat-to-hell pickup she presumed belonged to the night clerk. She was halfway through her second cigarette when she finally detected a foreign shape between the Volkswagen and the pickup. Though mostly cloaked in shadow and impossibly huge, she recognized it as a tortoise. It squatted there, the crown of its shell even with the car window. Its beak and monstrously clawed forepaws were bisected by the wavering edge of illumination. There was a blob of skull perhaps the diameter of a melon, and a moist eye that glimmered yellow.

—Wow, she said. She finished her cigarette. Afraid to move, she lighted another, and that was tricky with her hands shaking so terribly, then she smoked that one too and stared at the giant tortoise staring back at her. She thought, for a moment, she saw its shell rhythmically dilate and contract in time with her own surging heart.

The night remained preternaturally quiet there on the edge of the highway, absent the burr of distant engines or blatting horns, or the stark sweep of rushing headlights. The world had descended into a primeval well while she'd been partying in their motel room; it had slipped backward and now the desert truly was an ancient and haunted place. What else would shamble from the wastes of rock and scrub and the far-off dunes?

She finished the third cigarette and stuffed the pack in her jeans pocket, and with a great act of will sidled the way she'd come; not turning her back, oh

no, simply crabbing sideways, hips brushing doorknobs as she went. The tortoise remained in place, immobile as a boulder. The cosmic black tar began eating a few handfuls of stars here and there, like peanuts.

Once at what she prayed was a safe distance, she moved faster, counting doors, terrified of tripping in the dark, of sprawling on her face, and thus helpless, hearing the sibilant shift and crunch of a massive body sliding across gravel. But she made it to the room without occurrence and locked the door and pressed against it, sobbing and blubbering with exhaustion.

He lay face down in the middle of the crummy bed, his naked body a pale gray smear in the gloom. She went to him and shook him. He raised his head at a drunken pitch and mumbled incoherencies. He didn't react to her frantic account of the giant tortoise, her speculation that it might be even now bearing down upon them for a late-night snack, that the world might be coming to an end.

—Goddamn it, wake up! she said and smacked his shoulder, hard. Then, as her eyes adjusted, she saw tears on his cheeks, the unnatural luster of his eyes. Not tears; sweat poured from him, smoked from him, it saturated the sheets until they resembled a sloughed cocoon. The muscles of his shoulder flexed and bunched in agonized knots beneath her hand.

—There's been an incident, he whispered.

She wrapped her arms around her knees and bit her thumb and began to rock ever so slightly. —Baby, I just saw a goddamned turtle the size of a car in the parking lot. What incident are *you* talking about?

—It wasn't a water stain. You were right. It's a worm, like a kind that lived in the Paleozoic. The worm slithered off the wall when you left, made a beeline right over here… He pushed his face into the sheets and uttered a bark. —Look at the wall.

She looked at the wall. The ominous shadow was gone, melted away, if it had ever been. —What happened? she said.

—The worm crawled up my ass and there it waits. It's gonna rule the world.

She didn't know what to say. She cried softly, and bit her thumb, and rocked.

—I’m high, he said. His entire body relaxed and he began to snore.

—Oh, you jerk, she said, and cried shamelessly, this time in relief. No more pills with tequila chasers for her. She wiped her nose and curled into a ball against his clammy flank and fell unconscious as if she’d been chloroformed.

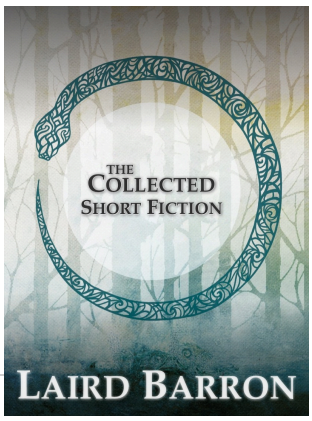
When she awakened it was still very dark. They lay spine to spine, her leg draped over his, her arm trailing over the edge and near the carpet. His body twitched against hers the way a person does when they dream of running, flying, being pursued through vast, sunless spaces. She closed her eyes.

He shuddered.

Something hit the floor on the opposite side of the bed with a fleshy thud, like a coconut dropping from a tree into wet sand. Her breath caught and her eyes bulged as she listened to the object slowly roll across the floorboards in a bumpy, lopsided fashion. This was a purposeful, animated movement that bristled every hair on her body. She reached over her shoulder and gripped his arm. —Psst! Honey! It was like shaking a corpse.

Quietly, muffled by the mattresses, someone under the bed began to laugh.

The Lonely Death Of Mr Haringa



This version taken from Laird Barron's
LiveJournal *Domination of Black*, March 2008
First published in *Jack Haringa Must Die!*, May 2008

The entomologist died with his bloody lips pressed to Mr. Haringa's ear. A slimy seal burst with a *pop!* when the scientist's head lolled, fell to the pillow. Mr. Haringa stepped away from the bed and its glassy-eyed passenger. The dead black bulk of a revolver lay near the corpse's left temple. The revolver was still warm, still reeked of scorched oil. So much for their Person of Interest. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his gory earlobe.

The wind came against the farmhouse. A draft licked Mr. Haringa's ankles. Limp drapes breathed like balaclavas to the small-mouthed windows. The windows were dark and cold. Everything rattled, sighed, subsided.

"Melodrama, day-o." Mr. Barton leaned against the door jam. A tall man, he appeared huge because the doors and halls were tacked up in the '40s when economy of design was king. "What did he say?"

Mr. Haringa wiped his hands, wiped his hands.

An antique clock ticked and clicked on an antique dresser; a bulb sizzled in a brass lamp. There were many framed pictures; generations of them, arranged by columns. The pictures existed under foggy glass, subjects made spectral by shadows, their abrupt irrelevance to any living being. Below Mr. Haringa's shiny wingtips, the tattered throw rug and warped floorboards, came dim, aquatic creaks and bumps of other agents on the ground level. Men in crisp suits knocking about with flashlights and cameras.

"Hey, Jack." Mr. Barton said.

"Yeah."

"Did he *say* something?"

“Yeah." Mr. Haringa finished wiping his hands. He didn’t know what to do with the cloth, so he held it between thumb and forefinger. Something crashed downstairs; nervous laughter followed. A dog barked in the yard. “Goddamn it. Fifteen minutes sooner…”

“Fifteen minutes sooner he might’ve plugged you or me instead of himself. Want coffee?” Mr. Barton didn’t wait for an answer; he snapped open his cell, briefed Section. Section had alerted the local authorities, would coordinate the necessary details. After disconnecting with Section, he took a deep breath, visibly composed himself for the call to their field supervisor. It was a short conversation—*Yes, ma’am. No, ma’am. We’ll be back tomorrow in the PM, ma’am.* The phone disappeared into his pocket. He shuddered, smiled in a perfunctory manner. “We’re done here. Want coffee? Let’s get some coffee.”

Mr. Haringa nodded. The techs would scour the room, ants on jelly. Maybe there was a note, a recording. Probably nothing. He followed his partner into the narrow hall, down the narrow stairs. They acknowledged the other men, the ones with the gloves and the specimen bags.

Once they were in the car and crunching slowly along the gravel lane, Mr. Haringa began to relax. He lighted a cigarette. Bony poplars clawed at the stars. Clouds blacked a steadily widening swath of the lower heavens.

Three cruisers from the Chelan County sheriff’s office met them head on, ghosted by, trailing rooster tails of dust. Red and blue flashes wobbled through the empty fields and imprinted behind Mr. Haringa’s eyelids.

“What’s with you?” Mr. Barton said.

“I couldn’t make it out.”

“Couldn’t make out what. What Plank said?”

“Yeah.”

“Looked like he had something on his mind.”

“Did it.”

“Yep. Hey, there’s that truck stop on 97. Burger and coffee.”

“OK.” Mr. Haringa cracked the window. Mr. Barton hated it when he smoked in the car. Mr. Haringa lighted another. His head felt thick, felt like

a lead ball. The adrenaline was seeping from his system, leaving him shaky and depressed.

They made the highway. Every mile reduced Mr. Haringa's sensation of dread, until what remained curled in the pit of his stomach. It hit him this way sometimes, but not often, not in years. This wasn't the suicide, either. Plank was a photo, a paragraph in a dossier. A pathology report now. Meat.

No, it was something else, some *indefinable* thing. The other team members had felt it too, judging by their flared nostrils and unhappy smiles. Mr. Barton felt it as well; he drove too fast. Barton always drove fast when he was in a mood.

Maybe the team *would* uncover something. Maybe there was a secret stash of chemicals, guns, incriminating documents. Bomb-making supplies. Mr. Haringa didn't want to go back and hang around. He preferred to wait for the report.

He said, "You think *she* knew?"

"She called it. She must've known something."

"Could be a coincidence…"

"And what do you say about coincidence?"

"Fuck coincidence."

"Right. So she knew, she was right about that much. But, if they don't find anything hot, it's going to look like another circle jerk."

Mr. Barton said, "You think they're going to post us in Alaska, huh? Don't worry—Alaska's pretty nice in the fall, long as you pack some electric underwear."

They drove in silence for a while. Then, Mr. Haringa said, "I wish I could've made out what Plank was trying to say."

"Uh, huh." Mr. Barton's eyes were slits in the dashboard glow.

"He… slurred. Mumbled. You know."

"Probably didn't see you, Jack."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Brains all over the wall. He didn't see you."

“He was pretty gone.”

“That’s what I told Section.”

“Good.”

“Good. Not our problem.”

“We got enough of our own.”

“Yep.”

The men chuckled, and now it shrank to a sliver, the wedge of ice in Mr. Haringa’s gut. Later, after a greasy dinner at the Rattlesnake Prairie truck stop, they checked into a no-tell motel, left a 5am wakeup call with the night clerk. The drive to Seattle would burn at least three hours and there might be snow in the pass even though spring was upon them.

Mr. Haringa donned his reading glasses and burned the midnight oil, scanning a briefcase load of papers, including geological surveys on the substrata of the Wenatchee Valley region and a corresponding environmental report documenting its effects on the local ecosystems. Then there was the twenty-page compilation of homicide, assault and missing persons statistics. This latter read like a segment from the *Inner City Beat* crime insert rather than the description of an agrarian county populated by vineyards, orchards and farms. Eventually he switched off the bedside lamp, sat against the wall, sipping bottled water. Mr. Barton snored across the room. Mr. Haringa couldn’t banish Plank’s red mouth from his mind. Freezing rain pelted the roof. The wind returned, hungry. The tall sodium lamp in the parking lot emitted a blurry glow and at some point it wavered and snuffed like a blown candle.

Black.

Right before Mr. Haringa went down for the count, the night terrors of childhood rushed over his skin and paralyzed him on the cheap bed in the unlit room. A door squeaked softly as it swung to and fro, to and fro and stopped. The blinds shivered.

Plank whispered into his ear, *They Who Wait love you, Jack.*

Mr. Haringa began a scream, but the blood was already pouring in.

Strappado

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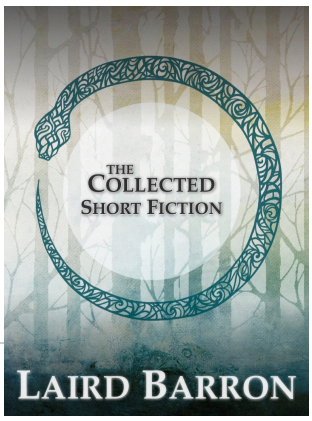

Kenshi Suzuki and Swayne Harris had a chance reunion at a bathhouse in an Indian tourist town. It had been five or six years since their previous Malta liaison, a cocktail party at the British consulate that segued into a branding iron-hot-affair. They'd spent a long weekend of day cruises to the cyclopean ruins on Gozo, nightclubbing at the elite hotels and casinos, and booze-drenched marathon sex before the dissolution of their respective junkets swept them back to New York and London in a storm of tears and bitter farewells. For Kenshi, the emotional hangover lasted through desolate summer and into a melancholy autumn. And even now, when elegant, thunderously handsome Swayne materialized from the crowd on the balcony like the Ghost of Christmas Past—!

Kenshi wore a black suit; sleek and polished as a seal or a banker. He swept his single lock of gelled black hair to the left, like a gothic teardrop. His skin was sallow and dewlapped at his neck, and soft at his belly and beneath his Italian leather belt. He'd been a swimmer once, earnestly meant to return to his collegiate form, but hadn't yet braced for the exhaustion of such an endeavor. He preferred to float in hotel pools whilst dreaming of his supple youth, once so exotic in the suburbs of white-bread Connecticut. Everyone but his grandparents (who never fully acclimated to their transplantation to the West) called him Ken. A naturalized U.S. citizen, he spoke meager Japanese, knew next to zero about the history or the culture and had visited Tokyo a grand total of three times. In short, he privately acknowledged his unworthiness to lay claim to his blood heritage and thus lived a life of minor, yet persistent regret.

Swayne wore a cream-colored suit of a cut most popular with the royalty of South American plantations. *It's in style anywhere I go*, he explained later

as they undressed one another in Kenshi's suite at the Golden Scale. Swayne's complexion was dark, like fired clay. His slightly sinister brows and waxed imperial lent him the appearance of a Christian devil.

In the seam between the electric shock of their reunion and resultant delirium fugue of violent coupling, Kenshi had an instant to doubt the old magic before the question was utterly obliterated. And if he'd forgotten Swayne's sly, wry demeanor, his faith was restored when the dark man rolled to face the ceiling, dragged on their shared cigarette, and said, "Of all the bathhouses in all the cities of the world…"

Kenshi cheerfully declared him a bastard and snatched back the cigarette. The room was strewn with their clothes. A vase of lilies lay capsized and water funneled from severed stems over the edge of the table. He caught droplets in his free hand and rubbed them and the semen into the slick flesh of his chest and belly. He breathed heavily.

"How'd you swing this place all to yourself?" Swayne said. "Big promotion?

"A couple of my colleagues got pulled off the project and didn't make the trip. You?"

"Business, with unexpected pleasure, thank you. The museum sent me to look at a collection—estate sale. Paintings and whatnot. I fly back on Friday, unless I find something extraordinary, which is doubtful. Mostly rubbish, I'm afraid." Swayne rose and stretched. Rich, gold-red light dappled the curtains, banded and bronzed him with tiger stripes.

The suite's western exposure gave them a last look at the sun as it faded to black. Below their lofty vantage, slums and crooked dirt streets and the labyrinthine wharfs in the shallow, blood-warm harbor were mercifully obscured by thickening tropical darkness. Farther along the main avenue and atop the ancient terraced hillsides was a huge, baroque seventeenth-century monastery, much photographed for feature films, and farther still, the scattered manors and villas of the lime nabobs, their walled estates demarcated by kliegs and floodlights. Tourism pumped the lifeblood of the settlement. They came for the monastery, of course, and only a few kilometers off was a wildlife preserve. Tour buses ran daily and guides entertained foreigners with local folklore and promises of tigers, a number

of which roamed the high grass plains. Kenshi had gone on his first day, hated the ripe, florid smell of the jungle, the heat, and the sullen men with rifles who patrolled the electrified perimeter fence in halftracks. The locals wore knives in their belts, even the urbane guide with the Oxford accent, and it left Kenshi feeling shriveled and helpless, at the mercy of the hatefully smiling multitudes.

Here, in the dusty, grimy heart of town, some eighty kilometers down the coast from grand old Mumbai, when the oil lamps and electric lamps fizzed alight, link by link in a vast, convoluted chain, it was only bright enough to help the muggers and cutthroats see what they were doing.

"City of romance," Swayne said with eminent sarcasm. He opened the door to the terrace and stood naked at the rail. There were a few tourists on their verandas and at their windows. Laughter and pop music and the stench of the sea carried on the lethargic breeze as it snaked through the room. The hotel occupied the exact center of a semicircle of relatively modernized blocks—the chamber of commerce's concession to appeasing Westerners' paranoia of marauding gangs and vicious muggers. Still, three streets over was the Third World, as Kenshi's colleagues referred to it whilst they swilled whiskey and goggled at turbans and sarongs and at the Buddhists in their orange robes. It was enough to make him ashamed of his continent, to pine for his father's homeland, until he realized the Japanese were scarcely any more civilized as guests.

"The only hotel with air conditioning and you go out there. You'll be arrested if you don't put something on!" Kenshi finally dragged himself upright and collected his pants. "Let's go to the discothèque."

"The American place? I'd rather not. Asshole tourists swarm there like bees to honey. I was in the cantina a bit earlier and got stuck near a bunch of Hollywood types whooping it up at the bar. Probably come to scout the area or shoot the monastery. All they could talk about is picking up on 'European broads.'"

Kenshi laughed. "Those are the guys I'm traveling with. Yeah, they're scouting locations. And they're all married, too."

"Wankers. Hell with the disco."

“No, there’s another spot—a hole-in-the-wall I heard about from a friend. A local.”

“Eh, probably a seedy little bucket of blood. I’m in, then!”

Kenshi rang his contact, one Rashid Obi, an assistant to an executive producer at a local firm that cranked out several dozen Bollywood films every year. Rashid gave directions and promised to meet them at the club in forty-five minutes. Or, if they were nervous to travel the streets alone, he could escort them… Kenshi laughed, somewhat halfheartedly, and assured his acquaintance there was no need for such coddling. He would’ve preferred Rashid’s company, but knew Swayne was belligerently fearless regarding forays into foreign environments. His lover was an adventurer and hard-bitten in his own charming fashion. Certainly Swayne would mock him for his timidity and charge ahead regardless. So, Kenshi stifled his misgivings and led the way.

The discothèque was a quarter-mile from the hotel and buried in a misshapen block of stone houses and empty shops. They found it mostly by accident after stumbling around several narrow alleys that reeked of urine and the powerful miasma of curry that seeped from open apartment windows. The entry arch was low and narrow and blackened from soot and antiquity. The name of the club had been painted into the worn plaster, but illegible now from erosion and neglect. Kerosene lamps guttered in inset sconces and shadows gathered in droves. A speaker dangled from a cornice and projected scratchy sitar music. Two Indian men sat on a stone bench. They wore baggy, lemon shirts and disco slacks likely purchased from the black market outlets in a local bazaar. They shared the stem of the hookah at their sandaled feet. Neither appeared interested in the arrival of the Westerners.

“Oh my God! It’s an opium den!” Swayne said, and squeezed Kenshi’s buttock. “Going native, are we, dear?”

Kenshi blushed and knocked his hand aside. He’d smoked half a joint with a dorm mate in college and that was the extent of his experimentation with

recreational drugs. He favored a nice, dry white wine and the occasional import beer, preferably Sapporo.

The darkness of the alley followed them inside. The interior lay in shadow, except for the bar, which glowed from a strip along its edge like the bioluminescent tentacle of a deep-sea creature, and motes of gold and red and purple passing across the bottles from a rotating glitter ball above the tiny square of dance floor wedged in the corner. The sitar music issued from a beat box and was much louder than it had been outside. Patrons were jammed into the little rickety tables and along the bar. The air was sharp with sweat and exhaled liquor fumes.

Rashid emerged from the shadows and caught Kenshi's arm above the elbow in the overly familiar manner of his countrymen. He was shorter than Kenshi and slender to the point of well-heeled emaciation. He stood so close Kenshi breathed deeply of his cologne, the styling gel in his short, tightly coiled hair. He introduced the small man from Delhi to a mildly bemused Swayne. Soon Rashid vigorously shepherded them into an alcove where a group of Europeans crowded together around three circular tables laden with beer bottles and shot glasses and fuming ashtrays heaped with the butts of cigarettes.

Rashid presented Swayne and Kenshi to the evening's co-host, one Luis Guzman, an elderly Argentinean who'd lived abroad for nearly three decades in quasi-political exile. Guzman was the public relations guru for a profoundly large international advertising conglomerate, which in turn influenced, or owned outright, the companies represented by the various guests he'd assembled at the discothèque.

Kenshi's feet ached, so he wedged in next to a reedy blonde Netherlander, a weather reporter for some big market, he gathered as sporadic introductions were made. Her hands bled ink from a mosaic of nightclub stamps, the kind that didn't easily wash off, so like rings in a tree, it was possible to estimate she'd been partying hard for several nights. This impression was confirmed when she confided that she'd gone a bit wild during her group's whirlwind tour of Bangkok, Mumbai, and now this "village" in the space of days. She laughed at him from the side of her mouth, gaped fishily with her left eye, a Picasso girl, and pressed her bony thigh against him. She'd been drinking

boleros, and lots of them, he noted. *What goes down must come up*, he thought and was sorry for whomever she eventually leeched onto tonight.

The Viking gentleman looming across from them certainly vied for her attention, what with his lascivious grimaces and bellowing jocularity, but she appeared content to ignore him while trading glances with the small, hirsute Slav to the Viking's left and occasionally brushing Kenshi's forearm as they shared an ashtray. He soon discovered Hendrika the weathergirl worked for the Viking, Andersen, chief comptroller and inveterate buffoon. The Slav was actually a native of Minsk named Fedor; Fedor managed distribution for a major vodka label and possessed some mysterious bit of history with Hendrika. Kenshi idly wondered if he'd been her pimp while she toiled through college. A job was a job was a job (until she found the job of her dreams) to a certain subset of European woman, and men too, as he'd been pleased to discover during his many travels. In turn, Hendrika briefly introduced Kenshi to the French contingent of software designers—Françoise, Jean Michelle and Claude; the German photographer Victor and his assistant Nina, and Raul, a Spanish advertising consultant. They extended lukewarm handshakes and one of them bought him a glass of bourbon, which he didn't want but politely accepted. Then, everyone resumed roaring, disjointed conversations and ignored him completely.

Good old Swayne got along swimmingly, of course. He'd discarded his white suit for an orange blazer, black shirt and slacks, and Kenshi noted with equal measures of satisfaction and jealousy that all heads swiveled to follow the boisterous Englishman. Within moments he'd shaken hands with all and sundry and been inducted by the club of international debauchers as a member in good standing. That the man didn't even speak a second language was no impediment—he vaulted such barriers by shamelessly enlisting necessary translations from whoever happened to be within earshot. Kenshi glumly thought his friend would've made one hell of an American.

Presently Swayne returned from his confab with Rashid and Guzman and exclaimed, "We've been invited to the exhibition. A *Van Iblis*!" Swayne seemed genuinely enthused, his meticulously cultivated cynicism blasted to smithereens in an instant. Kenshi barely made him out over the crossfire between Andersen and Hendrika and the other American, Walther. Walther

was fat and bellicose, a colonial barbarian dressed for civilized company. His shirt was untucked, his tie an open noose. Kenshi hadn't caught what the fellow did for a living, however Walther put whiskey after whiskey away with the vigor of a man accustomed to lavish expense accounts. He sneered at Kenshi on the occasions their eyes met.

Kenshi told Swayne he'd never heard of Van Iblis.

"It's a pseudonym," Swayne said. "Like Kilroy, Or Alan Smithee. He, or she, is a guerilla. Not welcome in the U.K.; *persona non grata* in the free world you might say." When Kenshi asked why Van Iblis wasn't welcome in Britain, Swayne grinned. "Because the shit he pulls off violates a few laws here and there. Unauthorized installations, libelous materials, health code violations. Explosions!" Industry insiders suspected Van Iblis was actually comprised of a significant number of member artists and exceedingly wealthy patrons. Such an infrastructure seemed the only logical explanation for the success of these brazen exhibitions and their participant's elusiveness.

It developed that Guzman had brought his eclectic coterie to this part of the country after sniffing a rumor of an impending Van Iblis show and, as luck would have it, tonight was the night. Guzman's contacts had provided him with a hand-scrawled map to the rendezvous, and a password. A password! It was all extraordinarily titillating.

Swayne dialed up a slideshow on his cell and handed it over. Kenshi remembered the news stories once he saw the image of the three homeless men who'd volunteered to be crucified on faux satellite dishes. Yes, that had caused a sensation, although the winos survived relatively intact. None of them knew enough to expose the identity of his temporary employer. Another series of slides displayed the infamous pigs' blood carpet bombing of the Viet Nam War Memorial from a blimp that then exploded in midair like a Roman candle. Then the so called "corpse art" in Mexico, Amsterdam and elsewhere. Similar to the other guerilla installations, these exhibits popped up in random venues in any of a dozen countries after the mildest and most surreptitious of advance rumors and retreated underground within hours. Of small comfort to scandalized authorities was the fact the corpse sculptures, while utterly macabre, were allegedly comprised of volunteers with terminal illnesses who'd donated their bodies to science, or rather, art.

Nonetheless, at the sight of grimly posed seniors in antiquated bathing suits, a bloated, eyeless Santa in a coonskin cap, the tri-headed ice cream vendor and his chalk-faced Siamese children, Kenshi wrinkled his lip and pushed the phone at Swayne. “No, I think I’ll skip this one, whatever it is, thank you very much.”

“You are such a wet blanket,” Swayne said. “Come on, love. I’ve been dying to witness a Van Iblis show since, well forever. I’ll be the envy of every art dilettante from Birmingham to Timbuktu!”

Kenshi made polite yet firm noises of denial. Swayne leaned very close; his hot breath tickled Kenshi’s ear. He stroked Kenshi’s cock through the tight fabric of his designer pants. Congruently, albeit obliviously, Hendrika continued to rub his thigh. Kenshi choked on his drink and finally consented to accompany Swayne on his stupid side trek, would’ve promised anything to spare himself this agonizing embarrassment. A lifetime in the suburbs had taught him to eschew public displays of affection, much less submit to a drunken mauling by another man in a foreign country not particularly noted for its tolerance.

He finished his drink in miserable silence and awaited the inevitable.

They crowded aboard Guzman’s two Day-Glo rental vans and drove inland. There were no signs to point the way and the road was narrow and deserted. Kenshi’s head grew thick and heavy on his neck and he closed his eyes and didn’t open them until the tires made new sounds as they left paved road for a dirt track and his companions gently bumped their legs and arms against his own.

It wasn’t much farther.

Daylight peeled back the layers of night and deposited them near a collection of prefabricated warehouse modules and storage sheds. The modules were relatively modern, yet already cloaked in moss and threaded with coils of vine. Each was enormous and had been adjoined to its siblings via additions and corrugated tin walkways. The property sat near the water, a dreary, fog-shrouded expanse surrounded by drainage ditches and marshes and a jungle of creepers and banyan trees.

Six or seven dilapidated panel trucks were parked on the outskirts; 1970s Fords imported from distant USA, their white frames scorched and shot with rust. Battered insignia on the door panels marked them as one-time property of the ministry of the interior. Alongside the trucks, an equally antiquated, although apparently functional, bulldozer squatted in the high grass; a dull red model one would expect to see abandoned in a rural American pasture. To the left of the bulldozer was a deep, freshly ploughed trench surmounted by plastic barrels, unsealed fifty-five-gallon drums and various wooden boxes, much of this half-concealed by canvas tarps. Guzman commented that the owners of the land were in the embryonic stage of prepping for large-scale development—perhaps a hotel. Power lines and septic systems were in the offing.

Kenshi couldn't imagine who in the hell could possibly think building a hotel in a swamp represented a wise business investment.

Guzman and Rashid's group climbed from the vans and congregated, faces slack and bruised by hangovers, jet lag, and burgeoning unease. What had seemed a lark in the cozy confines of the disco became a more ominous prospect as each took stock and realized he or she hadn't a bloody clue as to north or south, or up and down, for that matter. Gnats came at them in quick, sniping swarms, and several people cursed when they lost shoes to the soft, wet earth. Black and white chickens scratched in the weedy ruts.

A handful of Indians dressed in formal wear grimly waited under a pavilion to serve a buffet. None of them smiled or offered any greeting. They mumbled amongst themselves and loaded plates of honeydew slices and crepes and poured glasses of champagne with disconsolate expressions. A Victrola played an eerie Hindu-flavored melody. The scene reminded Kenshi of a funeral reception. Someone, perhaps Walther, muttered nervously, and the sentiment of general misgiving palpably intensified.

"Hey, this is kinda spooky," Hendrika stage-whispered to her friend Fedor. Oddly enough, that cracked everybody up and tensions loosened.

Guzman and Rashid approached a couple of young, drably attired Indian men who were scattering corn from gunny sacks to the chickens, and started a conversation. After they'd talked for a few minutes, Guzman announced the exhibition would open in about half an hour and all present were

welcome to enjoy the buffet and stretch their legs. Andersen, Swayne and the French software team headed for the pavilion and mosquito netting.

Meanwhile, Fedor fetched sampler bottles of vodka supplied by his company and passed them around. Kenshi surprised himself by accepting one. His throat had parched during the drive and he welcomed the excuse to slip away from Hendrika whose orbit had yet again swung her all too close to him.

He strolled off a bit from the others, swiping at the relentless bugs and wishing he'd thought to wear that rather dashing panama hat he'd "borrowed" from a lover on location in the Everglades during a sweltering July shoot. His stroll carried him behind a metal shed overgrown with banyan vines. A rotting wooden addition abutted the sloppy edge of a pond or lagoon; it was impossible to know because of the cloying mist. He lighted a cigarette. The porch was cluttered with disintegrating crates and rudimentary gardening tools. Gingerly lifting the edge of a tarp slimy with moss, he discovered a quantity of new plastic barrels. HYDROCHLORIC ACID, CORROSIVE! and a red skull and crossbones warned of hazardous contents. He quickly snatched back his hand and moved away lest his cigarette trigger a calamity worthy of a Darwin Award.

"Uh, yeah—good idea, Sulu. Splash that crap on you and your face will melt like glue." Walther had sneaked up behind him. The man drained his mini vodka bottle and tossed it into the bushes. He drew another bottle from the pocket of his sweat-stained dress shirt and had a pull. The humidity was awful here; it pressed down in a smothering blanket. His hair lay in sticky clumps and his face was shiny and red. He breathed heavily, laboring as if the brief walk from the van had led up several flights of stairs.

Kenshi stared at him, considering and discarding a series of snappy retorts. "Asshole," he said under his breath. He flicked his cigarette butt toward the scummy water and edged around Walther and made for the vans.

Walther laughed. "Jap fag," he said. The fat man unzipped and began pissing off the end of the porch.

"I'm not even fucking Japanese, you idiot," Kenshi said over his shoulder. No good, he realized; the tremor in his voice, the quickening of his shuffle betrayed his cowardice in the face of adversity. This instinctive recoil from

trouble, the resultant wave of self-loathing and bitter recriminations was as it ever had been with Kenshi. Swayne would've smashed the jerk's face.

Plucking the thought from the air, Walther called, "Don't go tell your Limey boyfriend on me!"

Guzman gathered everyone into a huddle as Kenshi approached. He stood on the running board of a van and explained the three rules regarding their impending tour of the exhibition: no touching, no souvenirs, no pictures. "Mr. Vasilov will come around and secure all cell phones, cameras and recorders. Don't worry, your personal effects will be returned as soon as the tour concludes. Thank you for your cooperation."

Fedor dumped the remaining limes and pears from a hotel gift basket and came around and confiscated the proscribed items. Beyond a few exaggerated sighs, no one really protested; the prohibition of cameras and recording devices at galleries and exclusive viewings was commonplace. Certainly, this being Van Iblis and the epitome of scofflaw art, there could be no surprise regarding such rules.

At the appointed time the warehouse doors rattled and slid aside and a blond man in a paper suit emerged and beckoned them to ascend the ramp. He was large, nearly the girth of Andersen the Viking, and wore elbow-length rubber gloves and black galoshes. A black balaclava covered the lower half of his face. The party filed up the gangway in pairs, Guzman and Fedor at the fore. Kenshi and Swayne were the next to last. Kenshi watched the others become swiftly dissolving shadows backlit as they were by a bank of humming fluorescent lamps. He thought of cattle and slaughter pens and fingered his passport in its wallet on a string around his neck. Swayne squeezed his arm.

Once the group had entered, five more men, also clothed in paper suits and balaclavas, shut the heavy doors behind them with a clang that caused Kenshi's flesh to twitch. He sickly noted these five wore machetes on their belts. Blood rushed to his head in a breaker of dizziness and nausea. The reek of alcohol sweat and body odor tickled his gorge. The flickering light washed over his companions, reflected in their black eyes, made their faces pale and strange and curiously lifeless, as if he'd been suddenly trapped with brilliantly sculpted automatons. He understood then that they too had

spotted the machetes. Mouths hung open in moist exclamations of apprehension and dread and the inevitable thrill derived from the alchemy of these emotions. Yet another man, similarly garbed as his compatriots, wheeled forth a tripod-mounted Panaflex motion picture camera and began shooting the scene.

The floor creaked under their gathered weight. Insulating foam paneled the walls. Every window was covered in black plastic. There were two narrow openings at the far end of the entry area; red paint outlined the first opening, blue paint the second. The openings let into what appeared to be darkened spaces, their gloom reinforced by translucent curtains of thick plastic similar to the kind that compartmentalized meat lockers.

"You will strip," the blond man said in flat, accented English.

Kenshi's testicles retracted, although a calmness settled over his mind. He dimly acknowledged this as the animal recognition of its confinement in a trap, the inevitability of what must ultimately occur. Yet, one of this fractious group would argue, surely Walther the boor, or obstreperous Andersen, definitely and assuredly Swayne. But none protested, none resisted the command, all were docile. One of the anonymous men near the entrance took out his machete and held it casually at his waist. Wordlessly, avoiding eye contact with each other, Kenshi's fellow travelers began to remove their clothes and arrange them neatly, or not so much, as the case might've been, in piles on the floor. The blond instructed them to form columns and face the opposite wall. The entire affair possessed the quality of a lucid dream, a not-happening in the real world sequence of events. Hendrika was crying, he noted before she turned away and presented him with her thin backside: a bony ridge of spine, spare haunches. She'd drained white.

Kenshi stood between oddly subdued Swayne and one of the Frenchmen. He was acutely anxious regarding his sagging breasts, the immensity of his scarred and stretched belly, his general flaccidity, and almost chuckled at the absurdity of it all.

When the group had assembled with their backs to him, the blond man briskly explained the guests would be randomly approached and tapped on the shoulder. The designated guests would turn and proceed into the exhibit

chambers by twos. Questions? None were forthcoming. After a lengthy pause it commenced. Beginning with Guzman and Fedor, each of them was gradually and steadily ushered out of sight with perhaps a minute between pairings. The plastic curtains swished and crackled with their passage. Kenshi waited his turn and stared at the curdled yellow foam on the walls.

The tap on the shoulder came and he had sunk so far into himself it was only then he registered everyone else had gone. The group comprised an uneven number, so he was odd man out. Abruptly, techno music blared and snarled from hidden speakers, and beneath the eardrum-shattering syncopation, a shrill, screeching like the keening of a beast or the howl of a circular saw chewing wood.

"Well, friend," said the blond, raising his voice to overcome the music, "you may choose."

Kenshi found it difficult to walk a straight line. He staggered and pushed through the curtain of the blue door, into darkness. There was a long corridor and at its end another sheet of plastic that let in pale light. He shoved aside the curtain and had a moment of sick vertigo upon realizing there were no stairs. He cried out and toppled, arms waving, and flopped the eight or so feet into a pit of gravel. His leg broke on impact, but he didn't notice until later. The sun filled his vision with white. He thrashed in the gravel, dug furrows with elbows and heels and screamed soundlessly because the air had been driven from his lungs. A shadow leaned over him and brutally gripped his hair and clamped his face with what felt like a wet cloth. The cloth went into his nose, his mouth, choked him.

The cloth tasted of death.

Thanks to a series of tips, authorities found him three weeks later in the closet of an abandoned house on the fringes of Bangalore. Re-creating events, and comparing these to the experiences of those others who were discovered at different locations but in similar circumstances, it was determined he'd been pacified with drugs unto a stupor. His leg was infected and he'd lost a terrible amount of weight. The doctors predicted scars, physical and otherwise.

There'd been police interviews; FBI, CIA, INTERPOL. Kenshi answered and answered and they eventually let him go, let him get to work blocking it, erasing it to the extent erasing it was possible. He avoided news reports, refused the sporadic interviews, made a concentrated effort to learn nothing of the aftermath, although he suspected scant evidence remained, anyway. He took a leave of absence and cocooned himself.

Kenshi remembered nothing after the blue door and he was thankful.

Months after their second and last reunion, Swayne rang him at home and asked if he wanted to meet for cocktails. Swayne was in New York for an auction, would be around over the weekend, and wondered if Kenshi was doing all right, if he was surviving. This was before Kenshi began to lie awake in the dark of each new evening, disconnected from the cold pulse of the world outside the womb of his apartment, his hotel room, the cabs of his endless stream of rental cars. He dreamed the same dream; a recurring nightmare of acid-filled barrels knocked like dominoes into a trench, the grumbling exertions of a red bulldozer pushing in the dirt.

I've seen the tape, Swayne said through a blizzard of static.

Kenshi said nothing. He breathed, in and out. Starless, the black ceiling swung above him, it rushed to and fro, in and out like the heartbeat of the black Atlantic tapping and slapping at old crumbling seawalls, not far from his own four thin walls.

I've seen it, Swayne said. After another long pause, he said, *Say something, Ken.*

What?

It does exist. Van Iblis made sure copies were circulated to the press, but naturally the story was killed. Too awful, you know? I got one by post a few weeks ago. A reporter friend smuggled it out of a precinct in Canada. The goddamned obscenity is everywhere. And I didn't have the balls to look. Yesterday, finally.

That's why you called. Kenshi trembled. He suddenly wanted to know. Dread nearly overwhelmed him. He considered hanging up, chopping off

Swayne's distorted voice. He thought he might vomit there, supine in bed, and drown.

Yeah. We were the show. The red door people were the real show, I guess. God help us, Ken. Ever heard of a Palestinian hanging? Dangled from your wrists, cinder blocks tied to your ankles? That's what the bastards started with. When they were done, while the people were still alive… Swayne stopped there, or his next words were swallowed by the static surf.

Of course, Van Iblis made a film. No need for Swayne to illuminate him on that score, to open him up again. Kenshi thought about the empty barrels near the trench. He thought about what Walther said to him behind the shed that day. He thought about how in his recurring dream he always chose the red door, instead.

I don't even know why I picked blue, mate, Swayne said.

He said to Swayne, *Don't ever fucking call me again.* He disconnected and dropped the phone on the floor and waited for it to ring again. When it didn't, he slipped into unconsciousness.

One day his copy arrived in a plain envelope via anonymous sender. He put the disk on the sidewalk outside of his building and methodically crushed it under the heel of his wingtip. The doorman watched the whole episode and smiled indulgently, exactly as one does to placate the insane.

Kenshi smiled in return and went into his apartment and ran a bath. He slashed his wrists with the broken edge of a credit card. Not deep enough; he bled everywhere and was forced to hire a service to steam the carpets. He never again wore short sleeve shirts.

Nonetheless, he'd tried. There was comfort in trying.

Kenshi returned to the Indian port town on company business a few years later. Models were being flown in from Mumbai and Kolkata for a photo shoot near the old monastery. The ladies wouldn't arrive for another day and he had time to burn. He hired a taxi and went looking for the Van Iblis site.

The field wasn’t difficult to find. Developers had drained the swamp and built a hotel on the site, as advertised. They’d hacked away nearby wilderness and plopped down high-rise condos, two restaurants and a casino. The driver dropped him at the Ivory Tiger, a glitzy, towering edifice. The lobby was marble and brass and the staff a pleasant chocolate mahogany, all of whom dressed smartly, smiled perfectly white smiles and spoke flawless English.

He stayed in a tenth-floor suite, kept the blinds drawn, the phone unplugged, the lights off. Lying naked across crisp, snow-cool sheets was to float disembodied through a great silent darkness. A handsome businessman, a fellow American, in fact, had bought him a white wine in the lounge; a sweet talker, that one, but Kenshi retired alone. He didn’t get many erections these days and those that came ended in humiliating fashion. Drifting through insoluble night was safer.

In the morning, he ate breakfast and smoked a few cigarettes and had his first drink of the day. He was amazed how much he drank anymore and how little effect it had on him. After breakfast he walked around the hotel grounds, which were very much a garden, and stopped at the tennis courts. No one was playing; thunderclouds massed and the air smelled of rain. By his estimation, the tennis courts were near to, if not directly atop, the old field. Drainage grates were embedded at regular intervals and he went to his knees and pressed the side of his head against one until the cold metal flattened his ear. He listened to water rushing through subterranean depths. Water fell through deep, hollow spaces and echoed, ever more faintly. And, perhaps, borne through yards of pipe and clay and gravel that hold, some say, fragments and frequencies of the past, drifted whispery strains of laughter, Victrola music.

He caught himself speculating about who else went through the blue door, the exit to the world of the living, and smothered this line of conjecture with the bribe of more drinks at the bar, more sex from this day on, more whatever it might take to stifle such thoughts forever. He was happier thinking Hendrika went back to her weather reporter job once the emotional trauma subsided, that Andersen the Viking was ever in pursuit of her dubious virtue, that the Frenchmen and the German photographer had

returned to their busy, busy lives. And Rashid… Blue door. Red door. They might be anywhere.

The sky cracked and rain poured forth.

Kenshi curled into a tight ball, chin to chest, and closed his eyes. Swayne kissed his mouth and they were crushingly intertwined. Acid sluiced over them in a wave, then the lid clanged home over the rim of the barrel and closed them in.

Catch Hell

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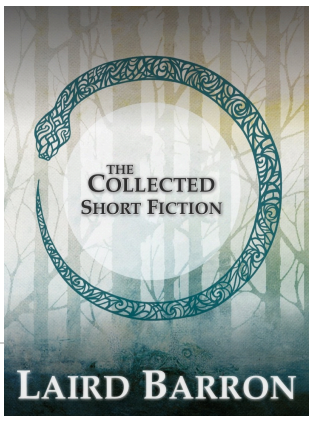

1

For years she awakened in the darkest hours to a baby crying. She finally accepted the nursery they'd sealed like a tomb was really and truly empty, that the crib was empty. She learned to cover her ears until the crying stopped. It never stopped.

2

Olde Towne lay forty miles east of Seattle in hill country, a depressed region populated by poor rural folk who worked the ranches, dairies, and farms. Forests, deep and forbidding, swept along the hem of tilled land. Farther on, the terrain rose into a line of mountains that divided the state.

The town's streets were bracketed by houses with peaked roofs. The houses were made of brick or stone with tall brick chimneys. People had settled here long ago; many homes bore bronze plates designating them as historic landmarks. Shops squeezed tight, fronted by wooden awnings and boardwalks; signs were done in gilt script over double-paned glass, or etched into antique shingles. Ancient magnolias and chestnuts reared at intervals to shade the sidewalks and the lanes. The police station, firehouse, and city hall occupied the far end of Main Street; art deco structures bordered by lawns, hedgerows, and picket fences. One could imagine the police gunning down the McCoys on the courthouse steps.

Sonny and Katherine Reynolds waited for the light to change at the intersection of Main Street and Wright. Options at the airport had been limited, so they rented a sedan—a blocky gas guzzler that swallowed most of its lane, but, happily enough, possessed far more than sufficient trunk

space to accommodate their luggage and Sonny's carton of research texts and notes. He told her several times during the drive it was like steering a boat. Katherine wanted a chance behind the wheel. Sonny laughed and said he'd let her drive it on the return leg of their journey. She called him a liar, but the ease of his humor, so removed from his usual melancholy, surprised her into a smile and she reached across and clasped his hand. Their hands on the wheel caught fire and burned orange, then red, as if they'd renewed an unspoken blood compact.

"Wow, a real live soda shop," she said. The sign outside of town claimed a population of three thousand. She estimated two or three times that number seeded throughout the surrounding countryside. Such a small, insular community—no wonder it clung to its heyday.

"Stuck in the '50s," he said. "Cripes—is that a wooden Indian in front of the barber shop?

"Yes indeedy."

"You gotta be kidding."

"I've never seen so many weathervanes in one place," she said. This was true; she spied one on nearly every roof, lazily revolving in the westerly breeze. Most were iron roosters.

"Wisconsin, it's cheese, he said. "Here, the fascination seems to be with cock. Gotta watch out for them cock fetishists."

"It's a left. Up ahead past that pink building." She shook her road map open.

"Looks like the set of a modern gothic. I read there's a big institution just down the road with the lights still on and everything. Guess they weren't *all* closed in the '80s."

Katherine immediately withdrew from him, embittered by his indifference, his callous disregard for her aversion to such places. "You fuck," she said and turned away and rested her forehead against the window.

"Yeah, I'm a fuck," he said cheerfully, and played with the radio dial. The local station crackled in. Apparently the afternoon DJ was a transcendentalist; she spoke in the monotone of an amateur hypnotist and

played recordings of wind chimes and the periodic rattle of what might've been gravel shaken in a jar.

The street narrowed to a bumpy stretch of country road, and climbed a series of bluffs that gave them a view of the entire valley. Sonny turned onto a blacktop drive that made a shallow, quarter-mile curve through a field of wild flowers and blackberry thickets and overgrown wooden fences, until it ended in a lot before the Black Ram Lodge. The building sat at the edge of a forest: brick and mortar and half-timber; three floors with a long, sloping tile roof flanked by hedges and a stand of enormous magnolia trees. The windows were dark and impenetrable.

"Nothing looks the same in real life," he said.

"It seemed way smaller in the pictures," Katherine said, even though she'd suspected otherwise all along. She'd taken the brochure from her purse, comparing black and white photographs against the real artifact. "God, I hope this place isn't as empty as it looks." *Why'd I have to say that? Another excuse for him to think of me as a needy little bitch? Being alone isn't so bad. Not like I'm alone, anyway. I got you babe, ha.* She glanced sidelong at her husband, checking for the oblique signs of contempt. *Maybe I am a needy little bitch. I'll say something stupid just to get a reaction. Some attention.*

There was no denying her dread of aloneness. She'd made peace with loneliness and sorrow, become accustomed to her own bleak thoughts, her recriminations and regrets. True isolation was a different proposition entirely. It seemed as if she'd dozed off during the drive from shiny, metropolitan Seattle and woken to find herself lost in a green wasteland. The town wasn't even comfortably picturesque anymore. Far below in the deepening gulf, lamps blinked on like the running lights of a seagoing vessel in fog. Sunset wasn't for another hour, yet a soft curtain of twilight had settled over the land. This was nowhere. *I hate you, Sonny. Selfish asshole.*

"I hope it is," Sonny said.

"Huh? Hope it's what?"

"Empty."

A wooden garage lay a hundred yards or so off in what had once likely been a cow pasture. Perhaps the garage was built from the bones of a massive barn, the place where they'd milked the cows, or slaughtered them. According to the pamphlet, more buildings were hidden beyond the central structure: a series of bungalows, a walled garden, a small distillery.

Two men stood in conversation on the cement steps of the main building. One was tall and lean, an older gentleman whose snowy hair touched the shoulders of his gray suit. The other man was a bit younger and heavier and dressed in slacks and a dark polo shirt.

"Welcome to Fantasy Island," Sonny said, and laughed. He put on his sunglasses and climbed out of the car. Katherine watched him approach the men on the steps. Exhaustion had stolen her will, melted her into the seat. She chafed at his ability to adopt a genial demeanor with such casual efficacy, like a chameleon brightening to match the foliage.

"Mr. Reynolds," the taller man said as he shook hands with Sonny. His voice was dampened by glass. "I'm Kent Prettyman, humble steward of the Black Ram. This is my accomplice, Derek Lang." As a group, they glanced at the car as Katherine emerged, a badger driven from her burrow. "Ah, Mrs. Reynolds! I'm Kent Prettyman. Call me Kent, please. And this is—"

Her sunglasses were the oversized variety worn by actresses and battered wives. "Kat. Just Kat."

"Meow," Mr. Lang said. His face was almost as dark as his shirt and he was brutishly muscular beneath the softness of his shoulders and belly.

Mr. Prettyman explained that Mr. Lang managed the grounds. There was a significant measure of yearly upkeep on the buildings and environs, a monetary burden divided between the state, the county, and the owners of the estate. When Katherine inquired who these owners were, he said the landlords, a family of hereditary nobility, resided in Europe. The family possessed numerous holdings and cared little for the lodge, leaving its management to intermediaries, most lately (as of 1995) a nonprofit foundation for the preservation of historical sites. All rather boring, he assured them. Did they have many bags? One of the boys would fetch their luggage and park the car.

The lodge predated Olde Towne and the very weight of its history settled upon Katherine's shoulders when she followed Mr. Prettyman through the double doors of age-blackened oak into the grand foyer. The Black Ram had been established as a trading post in the 1860s, doing a brisk business with settlers from Seattle and tribes from neighboring Snohomish Valley. The post was expanded and refurbished as the manse of the Welloc family, the very same who carried the deed to this day, until it finally became an inn directly following the Great Depression, and thus remained. Slabbed beams crisscrossed the upper vault and glowed gold-black from the light passing through leaded glass. Katherine squinted to discern the shadowed forms of suits of armor and weapons on display, moldering tapestries of medieval hunts, and large potted plants of obscure genus' that thrived in gloom. The flavor was certainly far more Western European than Colonial America, or America of any other era, for that matter.

She stood in the semicircle of men, oversized shades dangling from her fingers. Her arm brushed Sonny's and each of them instinctively flinched. She opened her mouth to mutter an apology and saw the gesture would be fruitless; he'd already forgotten her. His white shirt shone in the encroaching darkness and it illuminated his inscrutable, olive face, lent it the illusion of life. Mr. Prettyman said something to Mr. Lang, and Mr. Lang slunk away.

"No phones?" Sonny said, incredulous enough to drop his fake smile for a moment.

"There is a house phone," Mr. Prettyman said. He pointed to a wooden-paneled booth across from the front desk. Another bit of bric-a-brac from a dusty period in European history. Doubtless the lodge sported a billiards room, a smoking den, tables for baccarat and canasta. "And another in my office. No wireless internet, I'm afraid. We make every attempt to foster an atmosphere of seclusion and relaxation here at the Black Ram. Guests needn't trouble themselves with intrusions from the city while in our care."

"A *house* phone…"

"It's all in the brochure," Katherine said. "Didn't you read the brochure, honey? It'll be an adventure, like the hotel we stayed at in Croatia, or the other one in Mexico." Remote, decrepit half-star hotels, the pair of them. It

rained torrentially during their stay in Mexico and the roof leaked in a half dozen places, water fairly poured in, truth be told, and sent cockroaches skittering across the bed sheets in search of high ground. “Who cares. I’m sure we’ve got plenty of bars on this hill.” She flipped open her cell phone and checked.

“Are we the only guests?” Sonny asked.

“Oh, well, there are several others. Fewer than a dozen, at the moment. Midsummer doldrums,” Mr. Prettyman said. He rubbed his hands together when he spoke, absently polishing the malachite ring on the third finger of his left hand—Katherine couldn’t make out the symbol embossed upon onyx; a star, perhaps. “At our peak we can host on the order of eighty or so guests. I’ll give you a tour of the property—tomorrow morning, say? Allow me to introduce the staff.” Even as he spoke, a pair of strapping boys laboriously rolled a baggage cart overstuffed with the Reynoldses’ belongings through the lobby and onto the elevator at the opposite end of the room. The elevator was flanked by a pair of marble rams and appeared as ancient as everything else, a wide platform caged in wrought iron. It lifted almost silently, except for the soft ding of a bell and the hum and slide of well-oiled gears.

As promised, Mr. Prettyman walked them through the lodge, and Katherine smugly noted there was indeed a den containing card and billiard tables, an abundance of big game trophies, and the largest stone fireplace she’d ever seen—larger than the ones found in the proud old rustic ski lodges in Italy they’d frequented before Sonny broke his knee and gave up skiing altogether.

“Naturally it gets rather soggy during the winter, but summer storms are also fierce in these parts,” Mr. Prettyman said. “A front will roll down out of the mountains and positively deck us with thunder and lightning. Nothing like a roaring fire and hot cocoa to steel a soul against the weather…”

The proprietor oversaw a chef and bartender and their requisite assistants, a handful of maids and custodial personnel, two porters (Billy and Zack, the burly farm boys), a maintenance man, and the concierge, a gaunt, clerkish gentleman named Kristoff. Kristoff had jaundiced eyes and old-fashioned

false teeth that didn't quite fit his mouth. He smelled sharply of alcohol. Katherine thought the dour fellow probably kept a flask of something strong under the desk. As Mr. Prettyman swept them along to the upper floors, he mentioned Mr. Lang was responsible for nearly a dozen carpenters, laborers, and gardeners. In addition, Mr. Lang stood in as the de facto chief of security—he handled the infrequent trespasser; hunters, mainly. Poachers who slipped into the wooded preserve beyond the lodge in hopes of bagging a deer or one of the wild boars or black bears that roamed the hills. The land had once doubled as a private wildlife preserve.

"Wild boar? Bears?" Katherine wasn't happy with this revelation. "Is that even… well, legal?"

"I don't think the family concerned itself with the niceties back then," Mr. Prettyman said. "They stocked their game in the '20s, I believe. Possibly earlier. Money talks, as the saying goes. Local law enforcement was frequently invited to hunt with the, ah, royalty, as it were. Oh, and there's a small cougar population. Indigenous."

"So much for nature walks."

"Nonsense, Mrs. Reynolds! Don't bother them, they won't bother you. Very few of the big animals venture close to the lodge proper. Besides, if you'd care to explore the region, sightsee the ruins and whatnot, I'm sure Mr. Lang would be happy to organize a daytrip. He's a dead shot. Small likelihood of your being eaten by bears, I promise."

She pictured Mr. Lang's sadistic grin, his sweaty hands caressing a hunting rifle. "I think I'd like to lie down now."

Their suite occupied the second floor of the southern wing. It consisted of a living room, kitchenette, bedroom, and one and a half baths. The pine bureaus and armoire were antiques. A tapestry depicting a stag hunt hung over the bed, some pastoral oil paintings were scattered elsewhere, and in the living area a Philco radio that must've been popular in the 1940s, but no television. The living room window commanded a view of the forested hills.

Katherine eyed the stag hunt. The vision of the stag, rearing before frothing mastiffs and men on horses, all eyes black and wild, the horns and the

spears—this visceral image looming over the bed was a disquieting prospect.

"First no phones, now no television." Sonny rummaged through the drawers of a small writing desk. A kerosene lamp perched atop the hutch of the desk, bookending a handful of clothbound volumes so decrepit, humidity had sloughed the titles from their spines. He sniffed the sooty glass. "Makes you wonder how often they lose power. Prettyman says there's a coal furnace in the boiler room."

"Maybe it's part of the ambience. Lamps, rose petals—"

"Yep, and a romantic game of cribbage. Or dominos." He rattled a velvet bag and she laughed.

A few minutes later they argued, an indication things were back to normal, or what passed for normalcy here in the lucky thirteenth year of their union. She'd made reference to Mr. Prettyman's offhand comment regarding ruins and Sonny immediately clammed up. He leaped to his feet and began pacing the bedroom. Then he grabbed his coat. Katherine asked where he was going, alarmed at the prospect of being deserted in this place, surrounded by strangers, one of whom gave her the serious creeps. "Out," he said.

"But where?" By an act of supreme will she kept her voice level.

"Don't worry about it. Take a nap. Whatever." He was on his way, face set, a man in action.

Jesus, and I thought the alpha male routine was sexy, once. "We're in this together. This leaky ol' rowboat. Right?"

"I'll see you for supper." His demeanor was that of a man announcing to his family he was running to the corner store for cigarettes. *I'll be right back!* He turned away, snuffing the conversation.

"Yeah, sure." She wanted to stick her nail file in his ass cheek.

"Kitchen's open till ten. Put on something nice. You look good in the taffeta." He walked out, shutting the door carefully behind him.

Katherine flipped him the bird with both hands and slumped on the bed and seethed. She hated him, not because he'd dismissed her as one dismisses an

inferior, a child, although certainly that was a portion. Her rage sprang from the simple fact that he always seemed to know so much more than she did.

She went to the window and stared out at a landscape growing soft and shapeless as light slipped away. Toward the horizon and closing fast, came a towering storm cloud, a death's-head lit by internal fires. Her eyes grew heavy. She swallowed a couple of pills from one of multiple bottles that comprised her daily regimen of behavioral equalization, and fell asleep. Wind clattered the shutters and the last bit of evening sun faded and died.

3

Katherine had spent six years dwelling on the accident, yet she seldom pictured Janie. Baby clothes, the odor of formula and spittle, but not the baby herself. In retrospect, the pregnancy, the seven months that had followed, were dreamlike; they left an impression that she'd engaged in a protracted struggle with some indefinable illness or injury. Yes, it seemed the stuff of dreams. There *were* scars: her vertigo persisted, and too, her phobia of bridges and overpasses. Sometimes the cry of an infant caused her to lactate. Sometimes it elicited a flood of tears and inconsolable sobbing. She'd screamed at a hapless mother in a coffee shop; told her to *shut up her squalling brat* and was instantly mortified at the lady's expression of shock and fear. Thankfully, the fits of lunacy had ebbed.

Sonny had wanted another child right away. A few months after the dust of the tragedy settled, he insisted they try again. His desire developed into an unequivocal force, an implacable usurper of their life-aspirations, of all they'd planned during their days as romantic conspirators.

Katherine's mother pulled her aside at the family Christmas dinner—she recalled her father and Sonny's laughter echoing from the living room, how it transcended the boom and roar of a football game on TV. Sonny hated football, sneered at the preening athletes, their "bling" and arrogance; he pretended to enjoy sports to bond with her father who'd been a devout booster of his own hometown high school team since forever.

When a year passed without a positive result, they, or Sonny, to be specific, grew concerned. It developed his sperm count was merely adequate. The specialists were at a loss in her case; she tested fertile, nonetheless, her

insides had lapsed into a peculiar dormancy. Adoption was out of the question; Sonny would accept no less than his own image in miniature. This went on and on. Then the desperate act—the surrogacy. They borrowed money, they recruited a volunteer, and the volunteer miscarried. Their marriage plunged into the Dark Ages.

It wasn't the end, though. There's no end to hell.

4

Katherine and Sonny arrived in time for a late supper in the dining room. Sonny had apparently stopped off at the hotel bar and made the acquaintance of three fellow guests whom he invited to join Katherine and himself for supper. She instantly recognized that her husband had indulged in several drinks from his slightly disheveled hair, the width of his smile, the shine of his eyes. As he flushed, the old patina of acne scars became fiercely evident and roughened his cheeks, lending his expression a coarseness one might glimpse in a mug shot. Not good—Sonny's wit became caustic when he drank overmuch. Luckily, he didn't indulge frequently, preferring to focus upon less hedonistic pursuits. Katherine wondered if she might prefer an alcoholic husband to a morbidly obsessive one.

Gary Woodruff was a retired investment banker on vacation from Manhattan. He wore a suit out of place in their rustic surroundings. Lyle Cockrum neglected to divulge his occupation. Katherine pegged him for a playboy. His hands were fragile, his black hair expensively styled, his boredom complete and genuine. His designer clothes were loose and a compellingly tasteless shade of lime. He'd arrived with a frail blonde woman who'd immediately professed awful allergies and retreated to her room. The third guest, Melvin Ting, served as assistant curator of Olde Towne's most venerable repository of historical artifacts, the Welloc-Devlin Museum. Of evident Eurasian lineage, he struck Katherine as much too young for such a post: thirty years old at most, and clad in a turtleneck and slacks, a gold hoop in his left ear. He would've fit right in at a trendy coffeehouse slinging lattes or reciting the poetry of the disaffected. He also smiled too much for her taste. This, of course, was the very individual

they'd traveled from California to meet. However, since the rendezvous was intended to be clandestine, neither she nor Sonny gave any hint.

The chef personally introduced the courses, which included salmon and truffles, and sorbet for dessert. Afterward, they ordered drinks and lounged near the softly crackling hearth, their conclave presided over by an enormous black ram's head on the mantle. Buzzed from several glasses of red wine and somewhat disarmed by her cozy surroundings, Katherine nonetheless wished they'd chosen to call it a night. The lights flickered and died to a chorus of gasps and mild curses. The group sat in tense silence, listening to grand old beams shift and creak, and rain slash against the windows while hotel staff bustled about lighting lanterns and refreshing drinks.

"So, what's your line?" Mr. Cockrum said. He studied Sonny over the rim of a brandy snifter.

"Until recently I taught cultural anthropology at a little college in Pasadena. Folklore. I've dabbled in archeology. Now I write for travel journals." And, in a perfunctory gesture to his wife, "Kat is vice president of communications for the Blessingham Agency. They design colors."

"For marketing strategies, I presume," Woodruff said.

"If you've ever wondered where Super Burger restaurants got that color scheme, or why Tuffenup Buddy pain reliever comes in a Day-Glo pink box, I'm the one to ask." She smiled faintly.

There was a long, dead pause.

"How does one become an expert in folklore?" Woodruff's tone suggested vast condescension. He exaggerated the syllables of "expert."

"His father was a famous primatologist," she said in automatic defense of her husband's pride. Whether it would bolster his confidence or annoy him was a gamble. She couldn't help herself.

"Ah, not really famous," Sonny said. "He read traditional fairy tales to us kids every night. The unvarnished ones where Cinderella's sisters cut off pieces of their feet to fit the glass slipper. Sex and cannibalism—all the good stuff modern publishers whitewash. It stuck."

“He researched ape languages at Kyoto University.” Katherine tried her wine, determined to slug it out now that she’d gone this far. It had grown unpleasantly warm. “Sonny won’t tell you this, but his father, Quentin, did a lot of important work for the Primate Research Group in the 1950s. A very prestigious organization. The Japanese thought so highly of him they bought him a house.”

“He left the University long ago,” Sonny said. “I’m sure you’ve never heard of him—”

“What kind of folklore do you study?” Mr. Ting asked. He’d remained silent during dinner while chain smoking and sipping espresso.

“Japanese mythology. I’ve some facility with Chinese and Indian oral traditions, a smattering of others.” This was exceptionally modest of Sonny. He’d acquired extensive knowledge of several dozen mythological traditions.

“You get into the scary shit, I see,” Mr. Cockrum said. Katherine wondered how much the man knew about the subject. *Cliff Notes* and *Penguin Abridged Classics* most likely. He hardly seemed the type to pore over scholarly treatises.

“Eh, the *really scary shit* would be the Slavic mythos. Or Catholicism, ha-ha,” Sonny said.

“He’s written books.” Katherine stared at her glass. The vein in her temple began to pulse.

“Oh, more than magazine features? You mean real books?” Mr. Woodruff said.

“Ah, of course he has,” Mr. Cockrum said. “Publish or perish; is this not the academic way, Mr. Reynolds?”

What the fuck do you know about academia, Cock-ring?

“Damned right it is.” Sonny swallowed a half glass of whiskey and signaled the cocktail waitress for another. His ruddy flush deepened and crept beneath his open collar. He was growing bellicose and reckless and Katherine decided she’d best figure a graceful way to maneuver them away from the dinner party before things got truly ugly.

“Well, if you want spooky, get Prettyman or Lang to tell you about the local legends,” Cockrum said. “An associate of mine spent his honeymoon here a couple of years ago. They sat right here in this den and swapped ghost stories. Prettyman and Lang had some doozies about the Old Man of the Wood.”

“Oooh! The Old Goat!” Mr. Woodruff chortled at his own wit.

“I read about that,” Sonny said. “The locals used to think he stole their livestock and seduced their womenfolk—”

“—and granted wishes,” Mr. Ting said.

“For a price, no doubt.” Mr. Cockrum had lighted a cigarette. Its cherry illuminated the panes of his face.

“He has colorful appellations—Wild Bill, Splayfoot Bill, Billy the Black—”

“—Mr. Bill,” said Mr. Cockrum to Mr. Ting’s pained smile.

“Hear, hear!” Woodruff said. “Seducer of women? A satyr.”

Cockrum winked at Sonny. “Not a satyr. Not a randy flautist, not Pan incarnate. The legends around here are darker than that.”

“The Old Man of the Wood is a devil,” Sonny said. “One of Lucifer’s circle.”

“Or Satan Hisownself. Isn’t that right, Mr. Ting?” Mr. Cockrum exhaled toward the curator.

Mr. Ting shrugged. “Admittedly, in the olden days many an unfortunate event was laid at the feet, erm, hooves, of the Old Man.”

“I’d say rape, murder, mutilation, the kidnapping of wee children qualifies as *unfortunate*, all right.” Mr. Cockrum leaned toward Katherine. “You wanna see what I mean, there’s a painting of the old boy down the hall on the way to the stairs. Curl your toes.” Then, he lowered his voice to a stage whisper, “Prettyman says the Goat Lord still blunders through the darkest woods, that occasionally he meets up with a lost hiker, or a kid, pardon the pun… On nights such as these it almost seems plausible.”

On her way to dinner, Katherine had stopped to view the painting of the so called Old Man of the Wood. The oils were old and blurry, yet the depiction

of the naked figure in a grove was oddly disquieting. One could discern massive horns, obscured by shadow, a sinister smile, a beckoning hand, elongated and strange. The painting possessed a quality of tainted eroticism, the fanciful and unnerving impression of a piece of ancient history leaked into the present. It gleamed darkly from its alcove, insinuating the permanence of lust and wickedness and the mortal fascination with such corruption.

"Let us not forget, our esteemed proprietor was once a man of the cloth," Mr. Ting said. "A good Lutheran minister descended from the Olde Towne tradition of such men. Understandably his conjecture would veer to the ecclesiastical."

"Really?" Sonny said. "He appears a bit, I dunno, wild, to be a minister."

"*Former* minister," Mr. Ting said.

"I say, whoever named this lodge certainly possessed a fiendish sense of humor," Mr. Woodruff said. "*Black Ram* is a tad obvious, though."

"Placation," Sonny said. "One must give the Devil his due."

"Puhleeze!" Katherine reached over and smacked his arm to the accompaniment of groans and chuckles.

Lights sputtered and fizzed in their sockets and power was restored to a round of tipsy applause. There came a brief lull, and when people began yawning, she seized the opportunity to proclaim road exhaustion and soon the party drifted to their respective quarters.

5

Mr. Ting knocked on the door after a discreet period. Sonny poured nightcaps from a complimentary bottle of vodka management had stored in the icebox. Ting drew a leather packet from his valise and set it on the table and clicked on the lamp. The leather had paled to yellow and was bound with rawhide strings. The curator undid the knots and delicately spread several sheets of ancient, curling parchment. The papers were written in Latin, and decorated with alchemical annotations and cryptic diagrams. Ting explained that the materials had once been the property of the Welloc-Devlin Museum via the estate of Johansen Welloc, one of Olde Towne's

self-styled nobles during the early 1900s. Welloc was a trained archeologist and noted collector of antiquities, the latter including a preoccupation with manuscripts and art objects certain to have gotten him burned at the stake during quainter times.

"Olde Towne is a rather fascinating case," Mr. Ting said. "Reading between the lines one might surmise its founding fathers were predominately occultists. Witchcraft, hermetic magic, geomancy… the gentry pursued knowledge of all manners of superstitious methodology. A veritable goldmine for an anthropologist."

"A wet dream," Katherine said. Clearly the town hadn't escaped the eccentricities of its founders—a flock of Golden Dawn-style crackpots who'd transmitted their kookiness down through the generations.

While Sonny studied the papers, Ting made himself another drink. "You realize, I assume, this is all rubbish." He produced a battered geophysical map of Olde Towne and environs. Red X's marked several locations.

"Yes, yes. Rubbish." Sonny didn't bother to glance up. His eyes were slits twinkling with lamplight. He licked his lips.

Mr. Ting smiled dryly. "Nor should I need to warn you about the legality of traipsing across sites of cultural import… much less tampering with anything you might find. The locals frown upon tourists pocketing arrowheads and such as souvenirs. Mr. Lang keeps a sharp eye on the grounds, I might add."

"Not to worry, Ting. That's a contemptible sport." Sonny's grin wasn't his most convincing.

Mr. Ting nodded and dragged on his cigarette. He exhaled and his shrewd expression was partially screened by the blue cloud, the back of his hand. "You have to be cautious," he said. He gestured at the discarded leather case, the survey map. "A word to the wise, my friends: there are those in Olde Towne who enjoy meeting nice people such as yourselves. These parties I mention are possessed of selfish interests and curious appetites. That's all I'll say."

"Um, thanks," Sonny said.

“Forgive my crassness, but the fee… Regrettable, however, my acquisition of your papers was not without some jeopardy to my position.”

“Forgive you?” Sonny scribbled a check for a sum that made him wince, and sent the fellow on his way.

“Finally,” Katherine said. She thought of the rotting grimoires with titles in Latin, German, and Greek, the mandrake roots and moon dust, and the other items stowed among their suitcases and bags. What would the unflappable Mr. Ting think of those? *He’d probably think we’re just two more loons in a long line.*

Sonny locked the door. He went to the bed and dragged it about eighteen inches away from the wall. He’d purchased crimson chalk from a witch in Salem, Massachusetts. The witch was the real deal, he said, and he only tracked her down after many weeks of legwork. The crone dwelt in a shack in a bog, like all authentic witches did. She sold him the chalk, a dirty nub allegedly preserved from the collection of a Renaissance sorcerer who dabbled in the summoning of various entities best not mentioned, and candles made from the tears of freshly hanged men and babies’ fat. Katherine refused to ask what the so-called witch wanted in exchange for her services. The possibilities induced a shudder.

He drew a pentagram around the bed, and another on the ceiling directly above, all the while muttering a Latin incantation. When he’d finished, he dusted off his hands and surveyed his work. The pentagrams were protective circles designed to repel negative forces that crept upon hapless sleepers: the night hags, the succubae and incubi, whatever unnamed demons that made feasts of a dreamer’s spirit. “Be sure to step carefully when you get into bed. Smudge the line and it’s useless.”

“The maid is gonna love this,” she said. Probably Sonny had arranged for them to be left undisturbed, however. He thought of everything. “Maybe we should sacrifice a goat. Yeah, ram’s blood. And a virgin.”

“You’re drunk. Go to sleep,” he said.

Katherine lay sleep-drugged and passive while Sonny fucked her. His face always changed during sex. His eyes narrowed, his teeth shone like tarnished gemstones; he seemed dangerous and she occasionally fantasized he was a criminal, maybe a gangster who'd decided to have his way with her.

She turned her cheek against the coolness of her pillow while he grunted in her ear. The room was dark, but by the glow of the guttering candles she slowly realized Mr. Lang stood in the doorway, watching. She groaned, and Sonny put his hand over her mouth as he'd gotten in the habit of doing back when they were young and lusty and dwelt in an apartment with paper-thin walls. She struggled and that excited him and he moved faster, pressed her so hard the mattress formed a cave around them. Mr. Lang sidled from the doorway and toward the bed and slipped from her field of view. All she could hear was Sonny panting, her own muffled moans and cries. She panicked and thrashed against him and then she came and moments later he finished and collapsed upon her like a dead man.

Gasping and sobbing, Katherine shoved him until he rolled over. She frantically looked around, but Mr. Lang was nowhere to be seen. Her chest squeezed so tight her vision twinkled with motes and stars. Then, the urge to pee came over her. She was terrified to walk across the floor and into the pit of darkness that was the bathroom.

She lay awake, curled tight as a spring until morning light slowly pushed the shadows away and into the corners of the room. By then she'd half convinced herself Mr. Lang's appearance was that of an apparition. She chuckled wryly: What if Sonny's pentagram had kept them safe?

7

Good as his word, following breakfast Mr. Prettyman gathered a party, which included Mr. Cockrum and his girlfriend Evelyn Fabini, and squired his guests around the expansive property on foot. The morning was damp. Golden light fell over the leaves and grass. It was a hushed and sacred moment before reaping-time. The world was balanced on the edge of a scythe.

Mr. Lang, accompanied by a scruffy field hand type, shadowed them. Katherine's flesh crawled and she endeavored to walk so one or more of her companions blocked Mr. Lang's view of her backside. On several instances she'd begun to broach the subject of the man's intrusion into their bedroom, but Sonny ignored her this morning, submerged in one of his moods. He wouldn't have believed her anyway. She took her fair share of pills and that wasn't something he let her forget. The accident had destroyed his trust in her judgment, perhaps her rationality.

Their tour skirted the outlying forest. Katherine, a veteran hiker, was nonetheless impressed with the girth of the trees, the brooding darkness that lurked within their confines. Periodically, well-beaten paths diverged and disappeared into the dripping trees. Mr. Prettyman led them past a tract of stone bungalows and into a cluster of decrepit outbuildings. The distillery was in the middle stages of collapse, its equipment quietly rusting amidst the rye and blackberry brambles. A stream clogged with brush gurgled nearby. He claimed that one of the state's only functioning windmills, a stone and timber replica of the famous Dutch models, had long dominated the rolling fields. Storms destroyed it decades prior, but its foundation could probably still be located should an intrepid soul assay chopping back mountains of scotch broom and weedy sycamore.

It had grown hot. She stared into the distance where the tall grass had begun to turn yellow and brown, and felt an urge to fly pell-mell into the field and roll in the grass, to burrow and hide in the soft, damp earth, to stare at the sky through a secret lattice.

"What's that?" asked Ms. Fabini, Mr. Cockrum's pale young mistress. "Over there."

Katherine had previously noted a copse of rather deformed oak trees that crowned a low rise in the otherwise flat field. She counted five trees, each heavily entwined in hawthorn bushes to roughly waist height. The thorn bushes made a sort of arched entrance to the hollow interior. Shadows and foliage obscured what appeared to be large pieces of statuary.

Mr. Prettyman said, "Ah, that would be one of several pagan shrines scattered across this region. They're no secret, but we keep mention of them

to a minimum. The edification of our esteemed guests is one thing. Wouldn't do to stir up a swarm of crass tourists, on the other hand."

"Of course, of course, my good man," Mr. Cockrum said, to which the rest of the party members added their semi-articulate concurrence.

"Indian totems?" Mr. Woodruff asked, shading his eyes. "Shall we nip over and take a closer look?"

"Celtic," Sonny said.

"Quite right," Mr. Prettyman said. "You've done your homework. The details are sketchy, but Mr. Welloc and those of his inner circle imported various art objects from Western Europe and installed them in various places—some obvious, others not so. Allegedly, this piece was recovered in Wales."

"In other words, robbed from the peasants," Mr. Cockrum said to his girlfriend from behind his hand.

They filed into the copse where it was cool and dim.

"My word," Mr. Woodruff said.

The stone effigy of a muscular humanoid with ram horns reared some eight or so feet and canted sharply to one side. It radiated an aura of unspeakable antiquity, its features eroded, its form shaggy with moss that issued from countless fissures. Pieces of broken masonry jutted from the bed of dead leaves at the statue's foot—the remnants of a marble basin lay shattered and corroded. Even in its ruin, Katherine recognized the sacrificial altar for what it was. Heat and chill cycled through her. Blue sky peeped through a notch in the canopy and it seemed alien.

"Exactly like the painting," Sonny said, his voice hushed.

"It's… ghastly," Ms. Fabini said, white-gloved hand fluttering near her mouth as she stared in awe and horror at the statue's prodigious endowment.

"Oh, honey, control yourself." Cockrum squatted to examine the base of the statue, which had sunk to its calves in the dark earth. Sonny joined him, dusting here and there in a fruitless search for an inscription. From Kat's vantage, their heads obscured the Goat Lord's genitals. It struck her as a

disquieting tableaux and without thinking, she raised her camera and snapped a picture an instant before they rose, dusting off their hands.

Katherine toed the ashes of a small fire pit, stirred sand and charred bits of bone. She said to Mr. Prettyman, “Who comes here? Besides your guests.”

“Only guests. No one else is permitted access to the property.” Mr. Prettyman stood beside her. He’d tied his long, white hair in a ponytail. It matched the severity of his expression. “There are those who pay for the privilege of borrowing the shrine. They hold services, observe vigils.”

“You find it distasteful,” she said.

He laughed coldly. “I understand the will to madness that is faith.”

“You say they imported this from Wales.”

“Yes, from a ruined temple.”

“But, isn’t this a pagan god. It resembles—”

“Old Nick. Of course. Don’t you suppose The Prince of Darkness transcends religion? The true Man of a Thousand Faces. He’s everywhere, no matter what one may call him.”

“Or nowhere,” she said.

“Ah. You have a scientific mind.”

“What’s left of it. Not much room for superstition.”

“He doesn’t require much,” Mr. Prettyman said. “A fly will lay eggs on the smallest morsel.”

8

They lay in bed in the darkness of their small Pasadena home. He spooned her, his arm across her shoulder. The weight of his arm used to be a comfort; now it frightened her somehow. She knew he was awake because he wasn’t snoring. A fan revolved somewhere above them. The room broiled. Her skin was cold and slick. She trembled.

Katherine?

She held her breath, waiting for his hand to slide from her breast to her belly, to push her legs apart and begin stroking her pussy. This was how it

started, if it started at all. The hairs on her neck stood and she felt sick, flush with precognition that sent a wave of queasiness through her.

Did you do it on purpose? His whisper came low and harsh. It might've been the voice of a perfect stranger.

She cried then. Her entire body shook, wracked with shame and grief and guilty terror. His hand fell from her and he began to snore.

9

It wasn't a bad week. Sonny drank more than usual, which worried her at first. This seemed to improve his mood, however. Between his daylong excursions into the countryside and midnight sessions poring over the archaic tomes by candlelight in the far corner of the suite, he was utterly preoccupied. He acted euphoric, which was his custom when approaching the solution to some particularly thorny problem. He kissed her gently in the morning before his departure, and when they shared dinners on the deck overlooking the valley, he was absent-minded, yet sweet. She warmed to her independence, lounging with a book in the shade of the yard trees, walking the grounds as she pleased, hopping rides with Mr. Cockrum and Ms. Fabini for daytrips into town.

One late morning, she and Ms. Fabini contrived to ditch Mr. Cockrum when he nipped into the Haymaker Tavern to slum with the plebeians. The women explored, although there wasn't much to see after one had taken in the Main Street shops and the museum. The abbreviated center of town lay cupped by gently rising hillsides. Industry was relegated to the eastern edge, beyond the deep, quick waters of Belson creek, where dwelt the junkyards, auto shops, tattoo parlors, taverns, and the brewery, a monument which had been installed shortly after the end of Prohibition. Most everything else had withered on the vine over the years, leaving a series of darkened warehouses, the shuttered bulk of an old mill, and a defunct textile factory. These last loomed in steadfast isolation like headstones.

Ms. Fabini spotted a decent antique shop and they spent an hour browsing through Depression-era furniture and bric-a-brac. Katherine had wandered into a cluttered aisle in a gloomy corner of the shop when she came across several framed photographs taken in the late 1800s. Most were bubbled and

faded, but one stood in stark contrast, albeit yellow at the edges. A group of men in greatcoats and dusters stood around a wagon freighted with hay. The farmers were stoic as per the custom of pioneer America; even the youngest of them wore a thick, handlebar mustache. A blot of discoloration caught her glance. A person lay in the shadows beneath the wagon axle and leered between wheel spokes at the photographer, at her. She recognized the face.

10

Katherine went for a stroll along the grounds in the afternoon. She reached the second gate and kept walking, kept treading the path until she'd come to the bungalows, all of them locked, drapes drawn tight; a cluster of family tombs.

Mr. Lang reclined in a wicker chair on the grass. He set a bottle of beer on the table near his elbow. "Hello," he said. His smile was insolent.

She hesitated, then walked directly to his chair and stood nearly looming over him, fists set into her hips. "What do you want?"

"I live here."

"This one?" She gestured.

"The Goat's Head Bungalow," he said. His face was a dark moon. "Thinking of dropping in for a beer later?"

"No, Mr. Leng—"

"Lang. Call me Derek."

"I want you to stay far away from us, Mr. Lang. I don't like you."

Mr. Lang raised an eyebrow and took a pull from his beer. "Yesterday your husband went into the country to a farm I told him about. He bought himself a cute little nanny goat. Pure, virginal white. Paid me a hundred bucks to help him smuggle the critter onto the property. We took the goat to that shrine in the field. Man, that's one nasty dagger your husband's got. Said he picked it up in India from some real live cultist types. Some screws rattling around in there, you ask me."

She stared, dumbfounded. *He's not lying. Sweet baby Jesus, he's not lying.*

“I charged him an extra c-note to dump the goat in the woods. I’ve done it before for a few other wackos—usually cats and rabbits, but hey.”

“Screw you. Jesus, you’re insane. You’d best stay clear of us.” She hoped she sounded brave. She wanted to vomit. *Goddamn you, Sonny.*

“If you say so. I’m not the one slaughtering farm animals to get his kicks.”

“I should march right into Mr. Prettyman’s office and tell him what kind of psycho he’s turned loose on the public.”

“Should you?”

“Yeah. We’ll see how smug you are when you’re sent packing.”

“And I should be reporting your husband.”

That stopped her in her tracks. “About what? The goat? Go to hell. We’re leaving on Monday. Frankly, it suits me if we blow this freak circus a couple of days early.”

Mr. Lang’s smile faded. He said with mock gravity, “Interesting hobby he’s got, hiking in the hills, digging up things that don’t belong to him. Probably thinks he hit the mother lode. I could just shoot him. The sheriff would thank me.”

“What? No. Sonny doesn’t… He takes notes for his articles. Sketches, sometimes. That’s it.” Her guts felt like they were sliding toward her shoes.

“That’s it? That’s all?”

“Yeah. Just sketches.” She bit her lip until sparks shot through her vision and her eyes watered.

“Oh.” He nodded as if her explanation was eminently reasonable. “You’re a funny one, Mrs. Reynolds. Give me these come-hither looks all week, and now you get coy.”

“You’re deluded. Frankly, I can’t believe you dare to threaten my husband. Mr. Prettyman will—”

“I know you,” Mr. Lang said. “I check all the guests. That’s *my* hobby.”

She breathed heavily, her lungs thick as wet cotton. “You’re a peeping Tom, too.”

“You were in the papers. The Associated Press. You’re kind of famous, Mrs. R.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“With me? With me, you ask.” He chuckled, a soft wheeze that originated from the depths of him. “They let you walk. We’re so sympathetic these days. Throw your baby off a bridge and everybody gives you a hug and sends get well cards. So, Kat. Are you well? Those doctors fix your poor brain? Do those plainclothes detectives still follow you around, watching to see what ‘that crazy Reynolds woman’ is going to do next?”

She gagged on her tongue, choked when she tried to speak.

“Okay, darling. I’m not completely heartless. A cool grand, I forget to mention your hubby’s hijinks to the good sheriff. Hell, bring it over personally and I’ll take half in trade.”

Her arm swung wide, as if connected to someone else, and her fist crashed into his mouth. He slumped, arms hanging slack, as she stumbled backward. Blood dribbled over his chin. His sides shook and that wheezing laughter followed her as she lifted her skirt and fled.

Katherine made it to the suite. She leaned over the toilet and dry heaved. Her knuckles bled where she’d sliced them against Mr. Lang’s teeth. Numbly, she washed her hand and pressed a washcloth against the cuts until the bleeding stopped. *Christ, what now? What am I going to tell Sonny?* Who knew what Sonny would do. He’d probably accuse her of leading the bastard on. Not that he’d say it aloud. His disgusted expression would do the talking. She was the millstone around his neck. *Why, oh why don’t you just leave? Why not fuck your secretary, why not run away with one of those nubile coeds who are eager to throw themselves at you? Surely you could knock up one of those bitches and solve all of our problems.*

A better question might be: If she must stay, why not have an affair of her own? Mr. Lang’s bloody grin flickered in her mind and she realized her left hand had drifted to her inner thigh, that her fingers stroked softly, almost imperceptibly. “Oh, my God,” she said, and jerked her hand away. Her face burned.

She collapsed into a chair near the window. The light shifted to orange. A breeze swirled the leaves of the magnolias. What she saw then, with pitiless clarity, was an overpass, a woman carrying a pink bundle above a stream of headlights. The woman’s face was blank and cold as plaster. The woman

opened her arms. “Yes. I think I did it on purpose,” she said to the empty room, and wished she had a gun to put against her head.

11

Sonny stumbled in well after dark. He’d been clambering through hill and dale by the look of him—his hair was mussed, pine needles and leaves clung to his jacket, gathered in the cuffs of his muddy pants. He said hello and began to undress. Katherine still sat in the oversized chair in the gloom. She turned on the lamp so they could see one another. He glanced at her hand without comment and tossed his clothes in a pile near the foot of the bed.

“Sonny?”

“Yeah?” He regarded himself in the mirror. “Did you do anything today?”

“I walked around. Read a bit.” They’d been sharing a couple of the amusing potboilers from the reading shelves in the lodge’s den. Sonny had been pleased to discover titles by Machen and Le Fanu among the dreck.

“That’s nice.”

“Find anything?”

He shook his head. He rubbed his arm where a bruise flowered, dark and angry. “It’s like a jungle. Thorns everywhere. I could spend a whole summer in there with a chainsaw and not find anything. Sheesh.”

“Oh?”

He smiled briefly and took off his watch and set it on the dresser.

“Sonny.”

“Hmm?”

“You’re being careful.” When he didn’t answer, she cleared her throat. “No one’s following you, or anything. You’d know, wouldn’t you?”

“I’m just taking pictures.”

“Okay,” she said.

He walked into the bathroom and the shower started.

12

Sonny had tried to summon the Devil once. He'd drawn a complicated pentagram in the basement, lit some candles and slaughtered a stray cat with a ceremonial dagger. Satan was lord of all flesh; pay Him some blood and maybe He'd give them the means to make a child. It was the kind of stunt dumb, oversexed teenagers pulled to impress their friends and scare themselves. Sonny admitted such rituals were essentially powerless; on the other hand, mind over matter—spiritual placebo—was another beast entirely. She'd almost left him then. Only her numb guilt, her essential apathy kept her yoked to him. Later, she stayed because at its worst, their relationship made her a flagellant, made her a worthy penitent.

It all started innocently enough.

In high school and college Katherine had played with tarot cards and Ouija boards—the weird roommate with the weirder off-campus-friends syndrome. Drink a bit of wine, take a few hits and the next thing she knew she'd be having an unexpected quasi-lesbian experience, or would find herself smack in the middle of an amateur thaumaturgy session, or, on one infamous Halloween night, a botched séance. When she'd first dated Sonny it came as no surprise he dabbled in native rituals; this *was* his area of expertise. One didn't keep a stack of books on the nightstand such as the ubiquitous *The Golden Bough*, *The Key of Solomon,* and treatises by Agrippa, Bruno, and Mathers among a host of others, without dipping one's toe in on occasion. They practiced feng shui after a half-assed fashion; it was all the rage with their post-college associates like so many Westerners' fleeting dalliances with Buddhism and Kabala. Nothing serious; more a casual pastime akin to some couples' weekend canasta games. And if Sonny happened to study what he called "hoodoo" to a great degree, that was because his job depended on the research.

Then the accident. Matters had become bizarre. Kafka and William Burroughs type bizarre. At least Sonny hadn't tried to blast a glass off her head. He'd done other things, however. A quiet, festering resentment bubbled to the surface in a glance, a smile, the subtle tightening of his grip on her wrist, the way he hurt her in bed, though never beyond the pale, just enough to let her feel his animosity. She feared that's what they'd gradually become—a pair of mated animals who snapped and snarled at one another, who remained together due to instinct, to pure expediency.

His sophomoric attempt to raise hell, as it were, signaled a sharp descent.

Mind over matter, he said when first introducing her to the ebon figurine of some dead tribe's fertility god, a trinket he acquired during his travels abroad; he clutched the fetish in his left hand whenever they fucked—and, oh, hadn't sex become a choreographed event. He tried to put the fetish in her until she slapped him hard enough to leave a mark. *Mind over matter,* he said the next time from behind a Celtic mask while painting her with red ochre, and the time after that when feeding her peyote buttons while shaking voodoo rattles in her face. Once, they'd visited the wreckage of a church sunk beneath the projects in Detroit, and a priest in black robes killed a chicken and anointed her in blood as a circle of bare-breasted acolytes howled. The unholy congregation melted away and Sonny mounted her, his expression twisted, a mirror of her own insides, and after, neither could look the other in the eye. Riding the empty late-night bus back to their hotel, they huddled near the rear, she wrapped in a blanket, staring at her reflection, staring into and past her own dead eyes at block after block of urban blight; there were no streetlights, no blue flickering television screens or reading lamps, only the blackness.

No baby was forthcoming, either.

13

The next morning, after Sonny slipped away, she took a long hot shower and was drying her hair when she heard a door shut in the other room.

Someone left an envelope addressed to her on the table. Her name was printed in a loose, sloppy hand. The envelope contained two dozen photographs. Several were shots of Sonny digging up artifacts. Ten or so were close-ups of arrowheads, pottery, figurines and the like. All were quite damning in their clarity. An itemized list documented various pieces, where they'd been acquired and who purchased them. Some of the photos were fifteen or more years old, dating back to Sonny's graduate days. Katherine knew about his compulsive theft, but she'd not allowed herself to dwell upon how long he'd engaged in his habits.

The list was signed: *Meet me, tonight. Witching Hour.* Mr. Lang was indeed wily, leaving her to infer his identity and where to rendezvous. Her hands

shook as she tossed the envelope and its contents into the fireplace. She hugged herself and watched the packet curl and burn. Only much later, after she'd called Ms. Fabini to cancel their luncheon plans and burrowed under the covers to hibernate, did she recall that there were no ashes from the impromptu fire, only a fine tracing of soot that swirled and disappeared into the chimney.

In her dreams, Sonny called from the recesses of the chimney while she started a fire from his papers and books and a pile of his muddy clothes. She'd collected a sack of his clipped hair and threw it on for kindling. He screamed at her, but she didn't stop. She ripped off her wedding dress and added it to the blaze. A baby shrieked as it cooked and sizzled. She tossed on pieces of the old crib and watched them burn.

14

At first, she tried to convince herself this would be about rescuing Sonny from the clutches of crazy, vindictive Mr. Lang. Except, that didn't fly—there was no way to avoid the reality that Sonny getting caught and jailed for a few years would be a relief from tension and satisfying to boot. Truthfully, his getting nailed for a career of misdeeds appealed to her on several levels.

Regardless of Sonny's legal hassles or potential financial ruin, it was really his problem alone. Her face hadn't been photographed. Her name hadn't appeared on any lists. In any event, no matter how dire the circumstances, she could run home to mama; a girl could always do that. No, there were other deeper, less rational motives for keeping the rendezvous. She just refused to face them directly.

Katherine crumbled sleeping pills and Valium into two consecutive glasses of vodka and watched Sonny gulp them down. He was already a bit drunk, so it was almost like the movies, almost frighteningly easy. For all she knew she'd dealt him an elephant's dose that might stop his heart. He fell asleep in his chair, snoring gently into his scattered notes. She blew out the candles.

The hour was late.

The moon hung cold and yellow behind a gossamer scrim. Her shoes crunched against the path that wound from the lodge and its attendant structures. Katherine arrived on the doorstep of the Goat's Head Bungalow at the appointed time and was slightly surprised to find it dark. She rapped on the door and waited. Her left hand dug into her jacket pocket and tightened around the can of mace attached to her keychain. In her right pocket was an envelope stuffed with twenty dollar bills she'd withdrawn from an ATM in Olde Towne earlier that day. The mace was a decade old: Sonny bought it for her after a guy mugged them in Venice. The thug gave her a shiner and a sprained neck in the process of yanking away her camera. Stunned, Sonny had stood there while it happened. That evening in the hotel, he berated her for carrying the camera, for attracting trouble. Later, he apologized by handing her the mace and some flowers. When they returned to the states he enrolled in karate lessons and attended classes religiously until he quietly dropped them in a few weeks.

No one stirred within the bungalow; it squatted dead and cold as a husk, tenanted by silence so palpable it throbbed in her ears. Clouds slid across the face of the moon, and its yellow light curdled, reddened into the eye of a drunk. The temperature had dipped and her breath streamed from her mouth. She stepped off the porch and surveyed the empty field. Fire briefly shone within the distant oak grove.

She walked the path to the very shadow of the grove, hesitated before the briar arch. A figure barred the way, a black form silhouetted by the dim illumination from coals dying in the pit. "Mr. Lang," she said, knowing in that instant her mistake, experiencing the sweet, horrific bloom of understanding that accompanies waking to a nightmare within a nightmare.

He laughed. His laugh was similar to Mr. Lang's, but deeper, darker. Hearing it was like hearing blood rush over pebbles. Red shadows crawled from the fire pit and enlarged him. His outline flickered, suggestive of manifold possibilities.

"I'm here," she said.

"Yes, you are," he said in a voice that whispered as from a distance. A familiar voice, but clotted with an excess of saliva and eagerness. She thought if some ancient creature of the wood could form words this would

be their shape. “Bravery born of damnation isn’t courageous, is it, lovely one?”

“You’re Bill,” she said.

“If you’d like.”

“I brought money.”

“But I don’t want that.”

“Four hundred and sixty dollars. That’s all I could get. Take it… I’ll write you a check when we get back home. I’ll be wanting the negatives.”

“Negatives? Negatives for pictures that never were? I wouldn’t worry about them.”

“Take the money—let’s not play games, okay?”

“Yes, yes. It’s time to quit pretending,” he said.

“I don’t understand.”

He laughed again. The coals hissed and his silhouette became a lump of utter darkness. “These woods are very old.”

“And dark; I know,” she said. She could no longer see him. His presence magnified in her mind, it obliterated everything else.

“These woods are dear to me.”

“It’s right here. Please.” She brandished the envelope in defiant supplication. The envelope absorbed the starlight, gleamed like a tooth. “Here. I swear, my husband won’t trespass into the woods again.”

“Yet, he’s the fool who called me,” he said. “What of you, sweet?”

Her arm shook from extending the envelope, so she folded her hands at her waist. “I’ve never gone into the forest.”

“Pity, pity.” He laughed again and now she imagined a hyena with an overdeveloped skull regarding her from the darkness, a stag crowned by tiers of crooked and decaying antlers. There was a terrible sickness in that laughter. “What of you? Tell me what *you* need.”

“Nothing.”

“Best wish for something,” he said. “I could lie with you until you shrieked fair to drive the pheasants from their nests. Then I could split you open on

the altar and have you to the fullest."

"Oh." The stars began to flash and she allowed her jelly legs to fold. She bowed her head, aware of the obscenity of this pseudo genuflection. "Not that."

"Then speak your desire."

Her mouth opened and she blurted, "You fucking well know, don't you?" Tears dripped from the end of her nose. She dared to raise her gaze, lips curled to bare her teeth in an expression of abject self-loathing. "Give me that. It's what I deserve, isn't it."

"I think you are both richly deserving."

"What… what must I do?"

"Why, pet, it's done. All these years I've been waiting to hold up my end of the bargain."

He emerged from the curtain of darkness and it stretched to limn him, to halo him in a writhing, black nimbus. She looked upon him and gave forth an involuntary moan of terror. For a moment, it was who she expected, the huntsman, florid and smug in triumph. The moonlight brightened and his face waxed ordinary—the face of a lover, the man who reads the meter, a blank-eyed passenger sharing a bus seat; a face mundane in its capacity for cruelty or avarice. Then he smiled and fulfilled every dreadful image conceived in a thousand plates in a thousand hallowed tomes, and woodblock illustrations and overwrought cinema. Corrupt heat pulsed from his flesh; his breath stunned her with its foul humidity. Yet, the impulse to clutch his lank beard, to twine her tongue in his, consumed her will. Her thighs trembled and she moistened. She wept as she pressed her lips against his muscular thigh and inhaled the reek of sulfur, bestial sweat, and rank, overripe sex.

His fingers tangled in her hair, long nails like hooks pricking at her scalp. He whispered, "Ask and ye shall receive."

15

The sulfurous moon had almost dissolved into the horizon.

Katherine returned to the suite and stood for a while as a shadow among shadows, watching Sonny. He groaned in his sleep and called a name she couldn't recognize for his slurring. She erased a section of the ridiculous chalk pentagram with her bare foot, then went to him and murmured in his ear and coaxed him to bed. They fell across it and she undressed him. She sweated. The fierceness of her need was an agony, a pressure of such magnitude it eclipsed reason, caused the room to spin around her. The painting of the stag hunt caught her glance for a moment, its detail obscured and grainy, but—the mastiffs sat on their haunches and the stag towered on its hind legs, and the entire dark company gazed down upon the couple on the bed.

She caressed him, licked his ear and kissed his neck until he stirred and woke. It didn't take much more. Her heat was contagious and he made a sound in his chest and rolled atop her. She closed her eyes and arched, hooked her calves over his hips, pinned him to her with all her strength.

Motes and sparks behind her eyelids stuttered with her pulse. Pleasure shot through her brain and unfolded a kaleidoscope. She saw the white nanny goat bound at the foot of the statue. It bleated, then the knife and a fan of blood, her husband, his face one of legion, exultant and savage.

He drove into her without love, merciless; and in her skull, rockets. *Sonny, what did you wish?* She knew, oh, yes, but the question lingered, bored into her just as he did, and she trembled violently. *What did you wish?* The nanny goat rolled its head on the altar and its eyes flared red to a surge of panpipes, an offstage Gregorian liturgy, thunderous laughter.

She came, and, simultaneously, he rocked with a powerful spasm and bellowed. Her eyes snapped open. His face was a white mask, flesh stretched so tight his mouth pulled sharply upward at the corners. He vibrated as if he'd grabbed a high-voltage wire. Something cracked, a tendon, a bone, and he shoved away from her, flew from the bed and crashed to the floor. She managed to right herself. Her belly felt overfull. It was the strangest sensation, this ballooning inside, the sudden rush of nausea.

Sonny thrashed against the floorboards and continued to ejaculate. In the near darkness, she became confused by what she saw—the short, quick

spurts that arced across his body were neither ropes nor strands, but thick and segmented. She'd seen a dead bird in the garbage and what had feasted upon it in oozing carpets, and her mental equilibrium wobbled mightily. He squealed as his rigid muscles softened and sloughed. He rapidly diminished and became physically incomprehensible, emptied of substance. What remained of him continued to flow in seeping tributaries toward the bed, and her. It happened very fast; a time lapse photo of an animal decomposing in the forest.

Sticky things squirmed upon her thighs and loins, and when she registered the flatworm torsos and embryonic faces, she screamed, was still screaming long after people finally battered through the door and everything was over.

They couldn't find a trace of Sonny anywhere.

16

The pregnancy wasn't complicated. The hospital staff (they called it a "home") gave her a single occupancy room with a lovely view of the grounds. A squirrel lived in the chestnut tree near the window, and the nurses let her feed him breadcrumbs over the sill. Nurse Jennifer gave her medicine in the morning. Nurse Margaret tucked her in at night. Dr. Green visited daily and gave her peppermint candies, which she'd loved since childhood.

She slept a lot. She ate Jell-O cups whenever she liked, and watched *The 700 Club* on the television hanging in the corner. Occasionally, after dark, it'd be something nasty with bare tits and gouts of gore, children with withered faces who glared hatefully, and priests walking with their heads on backwards, but she didn't panic, the screen always went blank then returned to regularly scheduled programming when a nurse came in to check on her. Sometimes she watched the Reverend Jerry Falwell or Benny Hinn. She followed their sermons from a new King James Bible her father brought after an incident he'd jokingly referred to as an "exorcism" when she first came to the home. Admittedly, she'd had issues in the beginning, some outbursts. There hadn't been an incident in months and she'd practically blacked out entire sections of the Old Testament by underlining. She knew

what to expect. She was ready. Things had gone so smoothly, so dreamily, it had scarcely felt like being pregnant at all.

It happened in the middle of the night and she didn't feel anything after the epidural except sweet, bright oblivion. They removed the baby before she revived. Nurse Jennifer told her she'd given birth to a healthy boy and they'd bring him around soon. Several days later they wheeled her into the sunshine and parked her on the patio by the fountain. She loved this spot. The grounds were decorated with manicured hedges and plum trees, and obscured by the trees, a high stone wall topped with wrought iron spikes.

Dr. Green, Nurse Jennifer, and one of the big male attendants brought the baby wrapped in a yellow blanket. The doctor and the nurse seemed reserved, disquieted despite their friendly greetings, and they exchanged looks. She'd heard them whispering about progeria while they thought she was asleep. They probably weren't sure what to tell her, were doubtless loath to upset her at this delicate juncture.

Dr. Green cleared his throat. "So, have you decided what you're going to call him?" He watched carefully as the attendant put the boy in her arms.

"Baby *has* a name," she said, staring with wonder and terror at her child's face. *You'll be talking in a few months. Oh, sweet Lord, won't that be interesting?* His smooth, olive skin was pitted by a faint scatter of acne scars. His eyes were alive with a dreadful knowingness. He already resembled his driver license photo.

Vastation

This version taken from *The Beautiful Thing That Awaits Us All and Other Stories*, 2013
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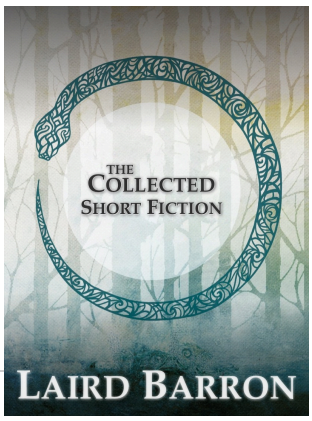

When I was six, I discovered a terrible truth: I was the only human being on the planet. I was the seed and the sower and I made myself several seconds from the event horizon at the end of time—at the *x* before time began. Indeed, there were six billion other carbon-based sapient life forms moiling in the earth, but none of them were the real McCoy. *I'm* the real McCoy. The rest? Cardboard props, marionettes, grist for the mill. After I made me, I crushed the mold under my heel.

When I was six million, after the undying dreamers shuddered and woke and the mother continent rose from the warm, shallow sea and the celestial lights flickered into an alignment that cooked far flung planets and turned our own skies red as the bloody seas themselves, I was, exiled, potentate status notwithstanding, as a flea.

Before the revelation of flea-ishness, I came to think of myself as a god with a little G. Pontiff Sacrus was known as Ted in those days. I called him Liberace—he was so soft and effete, and his costumes… I think he was going for the Fat Elvis look, but no way was I going to dignify my favorite buffoon by comparing him to incomparable E.

Ted was a homicidal maniac. He'd heard the whispers from the vaults of the Undying City that eventually made mush of his sensibilities. He was the sucker they, my pals and acolytes, convinced to carry out the coup. Ted shot me with a Holland & Holland .50; blasted two slugs, each the size and heft of a lead-filled cigar, through my chest. Such bullets drop charging elephants in their tracks, open them up like a sack of rice beneath a machete. Those bullets exploded me and sawed the bed in half. Sheets burst into flame and started a fire that eventually burned a good deal of Chicago to the ground.

Bessie got a bum rap.

In sleep, I am reborn. Flesh peels from the bones and is carried at tachyon velocity toward the center of the universe. I travel backward or forward along my personal axis, never straying from the simple line—either because that's the only way time travel works, or because I lack the balls to slingshot into a future lest it turn out to be a day prior to my departure.

As much as I appreciate Zen philosophy, my concentrated mind resembles nothing of perfect, still water, nor the blankness of the moon. When I dream, my brain is suspended in a case of illimitable darkness. The gears do not require light to mesh teeth in teeth, nor the circuits to chain algorithms into sine waves of pure calculation.

In that darkness, I am the hammer, the Emperor of Ice Cream's herald, the polyglot who masticates hidden dialects—the old tongues that die when the last extant son of antiquity is assimilated by a more powerful tribe. I am the eater of words and my humor is to be feared. I am the worm that has turned and I go in and out of the irradiated skulls of dead planets; a writhing, slithering worm that hooks the planets of our system together like beads on a string. When all is synchronized and the time comes to resurface, a pinhole penetrates the endless blackness, it dilates and I am purged into a howling white waste. I scream, wet and angry as a newborn until the crooked framework of material reality absorbs the whiteness and shapes itself around me.

My artificial wife is unnerved at how I sleep. I sleep, smiling, eyes bright as glass. The left eye swims with yellow milk. The pupil is a distorted black star that matches its immense, cosmic twin, the portal to the blackest of hells. That cosmic hole is easily a trillion magnitudes larger than Sol. Astronomers named it Ur-Nyctos. They recorded the black hole via x-ray cameras and the process of elimination—it displaces light of nearly inconceivable dimensions; a spiral arm of dark matter that inches ever nearer. It will get around to us, sooner or later. We'll be long gone by then, scooped up into the slavering maw of functionally insensate apex predators, or absorbed into the folds of the great old inheritors of the Earth who revel

and destroy, and scarcely notice puny us at all. Or, most likely, we'll be extinct from war, plague, or ennui. We mortal fleas.

The milkman used to come by in a yellow box van, although I seldom saw him. He left the milk bottles on the step. The bottles shone and I imagined them as Simic said, glowing in the lowest circle of Hell. I imagined them in Roman catapults fired over the ramparts of some burning city of old Carthage, imagined one smashing in the skull of my manager, and me sucking the last drops through the jagged red remnants while flies gathered.

I think the milkman fucked my wife, the fake one, but that might've been my imagination. It works in mysterious ways; sometimes it works at cross purposes to my design. I gave up fucking my wife, I'm not sure when. Somebody had to do it. Better him than me.

The flagellants march past the stoop of my crumbling home every day at teatime. We don't observe teatime here in the next to last extant Stateside bubble-domed metropolis. Nonetheless, my artificial wifey makes a pot of green tea and I take it on the steps and watch the flagellants lurch past, single file, slapping themselves about the shoulders with belts studded with nails and screws and the spiny hooks of octopi. They croak a dirge copped from ancient tablets some anthropologists found and promptly went mad and that madness eagerly spread and insinuated itself in the brainboxes of billions. They fancy themselves Openers of the Way, and a red snail track follows them like the train of a skirt made of meat. Dogs skulk along at the rear, snuffling and licking at the blood. Fleas rise in black clouds from their slicked and matted fur.

I smoke with my tea. I exhale fire upon the descending flea host and most scatter, although a few persist, a few survive and attach. I scratch at the biting little bastards crawling beneath the collar of my shirt. They establish beachheads in the cuffs of my trousers, my socks. And damn me if I can find them; they're too small to see and that's a good metaphor for how the Old Ones react to humanity. More on that anon, as the bards say.

At night I hunch before the bedroom mirror and stroke bumps and welts. It hurts, but I've grown to like it.

I killed a potter in Crete in the summer of 45 BC. I murdered his family as well. I'd been sent by Rome to do just that. No one gave a reason. No one ever gave reasons, just names, locations, and sometimes a preferred method. They paid me in silver that I squandered most recklessly on games of chance and whores. Between tasks, I remained a reliable drunk. I contracted a painful wasting disease from the whores of Athens. My sunset years were painful.

The potter lived in the foothills in a modest villa. He grew grapes and olives, which his children tended. His goats were fat and his table settings much finer than one might expect. His wife and daughter were too lovely for a man of such humble station and so I understood him to be an exiled prince whose reckoning had come. I approached him to commission a set of vases for my master. We had dinner and wine. Afterward, we lounged in the shade of his porch and mused about the state of the Empire, which in those days was prosperous.

The sun lowered and flattened into a bloody line, a scored vein delineating the vast black shell of the land. When the potter squatted to demonstrate an intricacy of a mechanism of his spinning wheel I raised a short, stout plank and swung it edgewise across the base of his skull. His arms fell to his sides and he pitched facedown. Then I killed the wife and the daughter who cowered inside the villa between rows of the potter's fine oversized vases I'd pretended to inspect. Then the baby in the wicker crib, because to leave it to starvation would've been monstrous.

Two of the potter's three sons were very young and the only trouble they presented was tracking them down in a field on the hillside. Only the eldest, a stripling youth of thirteen or fourteen, fought back. He sprang from the shadows near the well and we struggled for a few moments. Eventually, I choked him until he became limp in my arms. I threw him down the well. Full darkness was upon the land, so I slept in the potter's bed. The youth at the bottom of the well moaned weakly throughout the evening and my dreams were strange. I dreamt of a hole in the stars and an angry hum that

echoed from its depths. I dreamt someone scuttled on all fours across the clay tiles of the roof, back and forth, whining like a fly that wanted in. Back. And Forth. Occasionally, the dark figure spied upon my restless self through a crack in the ceiling.

The next morning, I looted what valuables I could from the house. During my explorations, I discovered a barred door behind a rack of jars and pots. On the other side was a tiny cell full of scrolls. These scrolls were scriven with astronomical diagrams and writing I couldn't decipher. The walls were thick stone and a plug of wood was inset at eye level. I worked the cork free, amazed at the soft, red light that spilled forth. I finally summoned the courage to press my eye against the peephole.

I suspect if a doctor were to give me a CAT scan, to follow the optic nerve deep into its fleshy backstop, he'd see the blood red peephole imprinted in my cerebral cortex, and through the hole, Darkness, the quaking mass at the center of everything where a sonorous wheedling choir of strings and lutes, flutes and cymbals crashes and shrieks and echoes from the abyss, the foot of the throne of an idiot god. The potter had certainly been a man of many facets.

I set out for the port and passage back to my beloved Rome. Many birds gathered in the yard. Later, in the city, my old associates seemed surprised to see me.

Semaphore. Soliloquy. Solipsism. That's a trinity a man can get behind. The wife never understood me, and the first A.I. model wasn't any great shakes either. Oh, Wife 2.0 said all the right things. She was soft and her hair smelled nice, and her programming allowed for realistic reactions to my eccentricities. Wife 2.0 listened *too* much, had been programmed to receive. She got weird; started hiding from me when I returned home, and eventually hanged herself in the linen closet. That's when they revealed her as a replica of the girl I'd first met in Lincoln Park long ago. Unbeknownst to me, that girl passed away from a brain embolism one summer night while we vacationed in the Bahamas and They, my past and future pals and acolytes and current dilettante sycophants of those who rule the Undying

City, slipped her replacement under the covers while I snored. Who the hell knows what series of android spouse I'm up to now.

I killed most of my friends and those that remain don't listen, and never have. The only one left is my cat Softy-Cuddles. Cat version one million and one, I suspect. The recent iterations are black. Softy-Cuddles wasn't always a Halloween cat (or a self-replicating cloud of nano-bots), though, he used to be milk white. Could be, I sliced the milkman's throat and stole his cat. In any event, I found scores of pictures of both varieties, and me petting them, in a rusty King Kong lunchbox some version of me buried near the—what else?—birdbath in the back yard. When I riffle that stack of photos it creates a disturbing optical effect.

The cat is the only thing I've ever truly loved because he's the only being I'm convinced doesn't possess ulterior motives. I'll miss the little sucker when I'm gone, nano-cloud or not.

During the Dark Ages, I spent twenty-nine years in a prison cell beneath a castle in the Byzantine Empire. Poetic justice, perhaps. It was a witchcraft rap—not true, by any means. The truth was infinitely more complicated as I've amply demonstrated thus far. The government kept me alive because that's what governments do when they encounter such anomalous persons as myself. In latter epochs, my type are termed "materials." It wouldn't do to slaughter me out of hand; nonetheless, I couldn't be allowed to roam free. So, down the rabbit hole I went.

No human voice spoke my name. I shit in a hole in the corner of the cell. Food and drink was lowered in a basket, and occasionally a candle, ink, quill and parchment. The world above was changing. They solicited answers to questions an Information Age mind would find anachronistic. There were questions about astronomy and quantum physics and things that go bump in the night. In reply, I scrawled crude pictures and dirty limericks. Incidentally, it was likely some highly advanced iteration of lonely old me that devised the questions and came tripping back through the cosmic cathode to plague myself. One day (or night) they bricked over the distant mouth of my pit. How my bells jangled then, how my laughter echoed from the rugged walls. For the love of God!

Time well spent. I got right with the universe, which meant I got right with its chief tenant: me. One achieves a certain equilibrium when one lives in a lightless pit, accompanied by the squeak and rustle of vermin and the slow drip of water from rock. The rats carried fleas and the fleas feasted upon me before they expired, before I rubbed out their puny existences. But these tiny devils had their banquet—while I drowsed, they sucked my blood, drowned and curdled in tears of my glazed eyes. And the flies.

Depending upon who I'm talking to, and when, the notion of re-growing lost limbs and organs, of reorganizing basic genetic matrices to build a better mousetrap, a better *mouse*, will sound fantastical, or fantastically tedious. Due to the circumstances of my misspent youth, I evolved outside the mainstream, avoided the great and relentless campaigns to homogenize and balance every unique snowflake into a singular aesthetic. No clone mills for me, no thought rehabilitation. I come by my punctuated equilibrium honestly. I'm the amphibian that finally crawled ashore and grew roots, irradiated by the light of a dark star.

I pushed my best high school bud off the Hoover Dam. Don't even recall why. Maybe we were competing for the girl who became my wife. My pal was a smooth operator. I could dial him up and ask his quantum self for the details, but I won't. I've only so many hands, so many processes to run at once, and really, it's more fun not knowing. There are so few secrets left in the universe.

This I do recall: when I pushed him over the brink, he flailed momentarily, then spread his arms and caught an updraft. He twirled in the clouds of steam and spray, twisting like a leaf until he disappeared. Maybe he actually made it. We hadn't perfected molecular modification, however. We hadn't even gotten very far with grafts. So I think he went into the drink, went straight to the bottom. Sometimes I wonder if he'd ever thought of sending me hurtling to a similar fate. I have this nagging suspicion I only beat him to the punch.

The heralds of the Old Ones came calling before the time of the terrible lizards, or in the far flung impossible future while Man languished in the throes of his first and last true Utopian Era. Perspective; Relativity. Don't let the Law of Physics fool you into believing she's an open book. She's got a *whole* other side.

Maybe the Old Ones sent them, maybe the pod people acted on their own. Either way, baby, it was Night of the Living Dead, except exponentially worse since it was, well, real. Congruent to Linear Space Time (what a laugh that theory was) Chinese scientists tripped backward to play games with a supercollider they'd built on Io while Earth was still a hot plate for protoplasmic glop. Wrap your mind around that. The idiots were fucking with making a pocket universe, some bizarre method to cheat relativity and cook up FTL travel. Yeah, well, just like any disaster movie ever filmed, something went haywire and there was an implosion. What was left of the moon zipped into Jupiter's gravity well, snuffed like spit on a griddle. A half million researchers, soldiers, and support personnel went along for the ride.

Meanwhile, one of the space stations arrayed in the sector managed to escape orbit and send a distress call. Much later, we learned the poor saps had briefly generated their pocket universe, and before it went kablooey, they were exposed to peculiar extra dimensional forces, which activated certain genetic codes buried in particular sectors of sentient life, so the original invaders were actually regular Joe Six-packs who got transmogrified into yeasty, fungoid entities.

The rescue team brought the survivors to the Colonies. Pretty soon the Colonies went to the Dark. We called the hostiles Pod People, Mushrooms, Hollow Men, The Fungus Among Us, etc, etc… The enemy resembled us. This is because they *were* us in every fundamental aspect except for the minor details of being hollow as chocolate bunnies, breeding via slime attack and sporination, and that they were hand puppets for an alien intellect that in turn venerated The Old Ones who sloth and seep (and dream) between galaxies when the stars are right. Oh, and hollow and empty are more metaphorical than useful: burn a hole in a Pod Person with a laser and a thick, oily blackness spewed forth and made goo of any hapless organics in its path.

The Mushroom Man mission? To liquefy our insides and suck them up like a kid slobbering on a milkshake, and pack our brains in cylinders and ship them to Pluto for R&D. The ones they didn't liquefy or dissect joined their happy, and rapidly multiplying family. Good times, good times.

I was the muckety-muck of the Territorial Intelligence Ministry. I was higher than God, watching over the human race from my enclave in the Pyrenees. But don't blame me; a whole slew of security redundancies didn't do squat in the face of this invasion that had been in the planning stages since before men came down from the trees. Game, Set, and Match. Okay, that's an exaggeration. Nonetheless, I think a millennia to repopulate and rebuild civilization qualifies as a Reset at least. I came into contact with them shortly after they infiltrated the Pyrenees compound. My second in command, Jeff and I were going over the daily feed, which was always a horror show. The things happening in the metropolises were beyond awful. Funny the intuitive leap the brain makes. My senses were heightened, but even that failed to pierce the veil of the Dark. On a hunch, mid sentence, I crushed his forehead with a moon rock I used as a paper weight. Damned if there wasn't a gusher of tar from that eggshell crack. Not a wise move on my part—that shit splattered over half the staff sitting at the table and ate them alive. I regenerated faster than it dissolved my flesh and that kept me functional for a few minutes. Oh Skippy day.

A half dozen security guards sauntered in and siphoned the innards from the remainder of my colleagues in an orgy of spasms and gurgles. I zapped several of the baddies before the others got hold and sucked my body dry.

I'd jumped into a custodian named Hank who worked on the other side of the complex, however, and all those bastards got was a lifeless sack of meat. I went underground, pissed and scared. Organizing the resistance was personal. It was on.

We (us humans, so-called) won in the end. Rope-a-dope!

Once most of us were wiped from existence, the invaders did what any plague does after killing the host—it went dormant. Me and a few of the boys emerged from our bunkers and set fire to the house. We brought the

old orbital batteries online and nuked every major city on the planet. We also nuked our secret bunkers, exterminating the human survivors. Killing off the military team that had accompanied me to the surface was regrettable—I'd raised every one of them from infancy. I could've eliminated the whole battalion from the control room with an empathic pulse, but that seemed cowardly. I stalked them through the dusty labyrinths, and killed them squad by squad. Not pretty, although I'm certain most of my comrades were proud to go down fighting. They never knew it was me who did them dirt: I configured myself into hideous archetypes from every legend I could dream up.

None of them had a noggin full of tar, either. I checked carefully.

I went into stasis until the nuclear bloom faded and the ozone layer regenerated. Like Noah, I'd saved two of everything in the DNA Repository Vault inside the honeycombed walls of Mare Imbrium. The machines mass produced *in vitro* bugs, babies and baby animals with such efficiency, Terra went from zero to overpopulation within three centuries.

The scientists and poets and sci-fi writers alike were all proved correct: I didn't need to reproduce rats or cockroaches. They'd done just fine.

The layers of Space & Time are infinite; I've mastered roughly a third of them. What's done can't be undone, nor would I dream of trying; nonetheless, it's impossible to resist all temptation. Occasionally, I materialize next to Chief Science Officer Hu Wang while he's showering, or squatting on the commode, or masturbating in his bunk, and say howdy in Cantonese, which he doesn't comprehend very well. I ask him compromising questions such as, how does it feel to know you're going to destroy the human race in just a few hours? Did your wife really leave you for a more popular scientist?

Other times, I find him in his village when he's five or six and playing in the mud. I'm the white devil who appears and whispers that he'll grow into a moderately respected bureaucrat, be awarded a plum black ops research project and be eaten alive by intergalactic slime mold. And everyone will

hate him—including his ex-wife and her lesbian lover. Until they're absorbed by the semi-infinite, that is.

I have similar talks with Genghis Khan, Billie Jean King, Elvis (usually during his final sitdown), and George Bush Jr. Don't tell anyone, but I even visit myself, that previous iteration who spent three decades rotting in a deep, dark hole. I sit on the rim of his pit and smoke a fat one and whisper the highlights of *The Cask of Amontillado* while he screams and laughs. I've never actually descended to speak with him. Perhaps someday.

Dystopian Days, again. That fiasco with the creatures from Dimension X was just the warm up match. Whilst depopulating Terra, our enemies were busy laying the groundwork for the return to primacy of their dread gods. Less than a millennium passed and the stars changed. The mother continent rose from primordial muck and its rulers and their servitors took over the regions they desired and we humans got the scraps.

It didn't even amount to a shooting war—Occasionally one or another cephalopodan monstrosity lumbered forth from the slimy sea and Hoovered up a hundred thousand from the crowded tenements beneath an atmospheric dome or conculcated another half billion of them to jelly. The Old Ones hooted and cavorted and colors not meant to be seen by human eyes drove whole continental populations to suicide or catatonia. Numerous regions of the planet became even more polluted and inhospitable to carbon based life. But this behavior signified nothing of malice; it was an afterthought. Notable landmarks survived in defiance of conventional Hollywood Armageddon logic—New York, Paris, Tokyo. What kind of monsters eat Yokohama and leave Tokyo standing? There wasn't a damned thing mankind could do to affect these shambling beings who exist partially in extra dimensional vaults of space-time. The Old Ones didn't give a rat's ass about our nukes, our neutron bombs, our anthrax, our existence in general.

Eventually, we did what men do best and aimed our fear and rage at one another. The Pogroms were a riot, literally. I slept through most of them. My approval rating was in the toilet; a lot of my constituent children plotted to draw and quarter their Dear Leader, their All Father, despite the fact the masses had everything. *Everything* except what they most desired—the end

of the Occupation. I was a god emperor who didn't measure up to the real thing lurching along the horizon two hundred stories high.

Still, you'd think superpowers and the quenching of material hunger might suffice. Wrongo. Sure, sure, everybody went bonkers for molecular modifications when the technology arrived on the scene. It was my booboo to even drop a hint regarding that avenue of scientific inquiry—and no, I'm not an egghead. Stick around long enough to watch civilization go through the rinse cycle and you start to look smarter than you really are.

On one of my frequent jaunts to ye olden times I attended a yacht party thrown by Caligula. Cal didn't make an appearance; he'd gone with a party of visiting senators to have an orgy at the altar of Artemis. I missed the little punk. I was drunk as a lord and chatting up some prime Macedonian honeys, when one of Cal's pet mathematicians started holding forth primitive astrophysical theories I'd seen debunked in more lifetimes than I care to count. One argument led to another and the next thing I know, me and Prof Toga are hanging our sandals over the stern and I'm trying to explain; via my own admittedly crude understanding, the basics of molecular biology and how nano-bots are the wave of the future.

Ha! We know how that turned out, don't we? The average schmuck acquired the ability to modify his biological settings with the flip of a mental switch. Everybody fooled around with sprouting extra arms and legs, bat wings and gigantic penises, and in general ran amok. A few even joined forces and blew themselves up large enough to take on our overlords of non Euclidian properties. Imagine a Macy's Day float filled to the stem with blood. Then imagine that float in the grip of a flabby, squamous set of claws, or an enveloping tentacle—and a big, convulsive squeeze. Not pretty.

Like fries with a burger, this new craze also conferred a limited form of immortality. I say limited because hacking each other to bits, drinking each other's blood, or committing thrill kills in a million different ways remained a game ender. The other drawback was that fucking around with one's DNA also seemed to make Swiss cheese of one's brain. So, a good percentage of humanity went to work on their brothers and sisters hammer and tong, tooth and claw, in the Mother of All Wars, while an equal number swapped around their primal matter so much they gradually converted themselves to

blithering masses of effluvium and drifted away, or were rendered unto ooze that returned to the brine.

It was a big old mess, and as I said, arguably my fault. A few of my closest, and only, friends (collaborators with the extra dimensional monster set) got together and decided to put me out of my misery—for the sake of all concerned, which was everyone in the known universe, except me. The sneaky bastards crept into the past and blasted me while I lay comatose from a semi-lethal cocktail of booze, drugs, and guilt. That's where you, or me, came in. I mean, no matter who you are, you're really me, in drag or out.

Afterward, the gang held a private wake that lasted nearly a month. There were lovely eulogies and good booze and a surprising measure of crocodile (better than nothing!) grief. I was impressed and even a little touched.

For a couple thousand years I played dead. And once bored with my private version of Paradise Lost, I reorganized myself into material form and began a comeback that involved a centuries-long campaign of terror through proxy. I had a hell of a time tracking down my erstwhile comrades. Those who'd irritated me most, I kept trapped in perpetual stasis. Mine is the First Power, and to this day I, or one of my ever exponentially replicating selves, revive a traitor on occasions that I'm in a pissy mood and torment him or her in diabolical ways I've perfected past, present, and future.

Now, it amuses me to walk among mortals in disguise of a fellow commoner. I also feel a hell of a lot safer—the Old Ones sometimes rouse from their obliviousness to humanity and send questing tendrils to identify and extract those who excite their obscene, yet unknowable interest.

I'm going to wait them out.

Seven or eight of us still celebrate Fourth of July despite the fact the United States is now of no more modern relevance than cave paintings by hominids. Specialist historians and sentimental fools such as myself are the only ones who care.

This year, Pontiff Sacrus, Lord High Necromancer bought me a hotdog, heavy on the mustard, from an actual human vendor, and we sat on a park

bench. Fireworks cracked over the lake. Small red and green paper lanterns bobbed on the water. The lanterns were dogs and cats, and Paul Revere and his Horse. The city had strung wires along the thoroughfares. American flags chattered in a stiffening breeze. I breathed in the smoke and petted Softy-Cuddles who'd appeared from nowhere to settle in my lap.

The Pogroms were finished. Pontiff Sacrus had overseen the Stonehenge Massacre that spring and there weren't any further executions scheduled. According to my calculations exactly six hundred and sixty-seven unmodified Homo sapiens remained extant, although none were aware the majority of the billions who populated the planet were replicants, androids, and remote-operated clones. Pontiff Sacrus's purge squads had eradicated the changelings and shifters and the gene-splicers and any related medical doctors who might conspire to reintroduce that most diabolical technology. He'd reversed the Singularity and lobotomized the once nigh universal A.I. Super job, Pontiff, old bean. He purported himself to be the High Priest of the Undying Ones, but they ignored him pretty much the same as every priest of every denomination has ever been ignored by his deity.

Now, the Pontiff has been around for ages and ages. He's kept himself ticking by the liberal application of nano-enhanced elixirs, molecular tomfoolery, and outdated cloning tech. Probably the only remaining shred of his humanity lies within that mystical force that animates us monkeys. His is the face of a gargoyle bust or the most Goddamned beautiful, dick stiffening angel ever to walk the Earth. He's moody, like me. That's to be expected, since on the molecular level he is me. Right?

Man, oh man, was he shocked when I appeared in a puff of sulfurous smoke after all these eons. I'm a legend; a boogeyman that got assimilated by pop culture and shat out, forgotten by the masses. *Every* devil is forgotten once a society falls far enough. But Pontiff Sacrus remembered. His fear rushed through him like fire; he smelled as if he were burning right there beside me on the bench. He finally grasped that it was I who'd tormented and slain, one by one, our inner circle.

We watched the fireworks, and when the show wound down, I told him I'd decided to reach back and erase his entire ancestry from the Space Time Continuum. The honorable High Necromancer would cease to exist. The spectacle of the god's anguish thrilled me in ways I hadn't anticipated.

Naturally, I never planned to actually nullify his existence. Instead, I made him gaze into the Hell of my left eye. He shrieked as I manually severed his personal timeline at the culmination of the fireworks display and set it for continual loop with a delay at the final juncture so he might fraternize with his accumulating selves before the big rewind.

Last I checked, the crowd of Sacrus' has overflowed the park. He'll be/is a city of living nerves, each thread shrieking for eternity. My kind of music.

Crete, 45 B.C., again. The Universe is a cell. I travel by osmosis. Randomly, to and fro betwixt the poles that fuse everything. It's dark but for a candle within the potter's house. The blood odor is thick. My prior self snores within, sleeping the sleep of the damned. I alight upon the slanted roof; I peep through chinks and spy our restless form in the shadows. He whimpers.

Because I'm bored to tears with my existence, and just to see what will happen, I slip down through the cracks and smother him. His eyes snap open near the end. They shine with blind energy and his bowels release, and he is finished. Then I toss his corpse into the well, and return to the bed and fall asleep in his place.

I've gone back a hundred times to perpetrate the same self murder. I've sat upon the hillside and watched with detached horror as a dozen of my selves scrabble across the roof like ungainly crows, and one by one enter the house to do the dirty deed, then file in and out to and from the well like a stream of ants. This changes nothing. The problem is, the Universe is constantly in motion. The Universe stretches to a smear and cycles like a slinky reversing through its own spine. No matter what I do, stuff keeps happening in an uninterruptable stream.

How I wish the Pod People could give me a hand, help me explore self annihilation or ultimate enlightenment, which I'm certain are one and the same. Alas, their alien intellect, a fungal strain that resists the vagaries of vacuum, light and dark, heat and cold, remains supremely inscrutable. That goes double for their gargantuan masters. Like me, the fungal tribe and their

monster gods (and ours?) exist at all points south of the present. It’s enough to drive a man insane.

After epochs that rival the reign of the dinosaurs, the stars are no longer right. Yesterday the black continent and its black house sank beneath the sallow, poison waves and the Old Ones dream again in the dread majesty of undeath. I wonder how long it will be before the dregs of humanity ventures from the bubble-domed metropolises it’s known for ages beyond reckoning. The machines are breaking down, and they need them since after the Pogroms all bio modifications were purged. Just soft, weak Homo sapiens as God intended. The population is critically low and what with all those generations of inbreeding and resultant infertility I don’t predict a bounce back this time. Another generation or two and it’ll be over. Enter (again) the rats, the cockroaches and the super beetles.

I sigh. I’m shaving. Wife is in the kitchen chopping onions while the tiny black and white television broadcasts a cooking show. The morning sky is the color of burnt iron. If I concentrate, I can hear, yet hundreds of millions of light years off, the throb and growl of Ur-Nyctos as it devours strings of matter like a kid sucking up grandma’s pasta.

I stare at my freakish eyeball, gaze into the distorted pupil until it expands and fills the mirror, fills my brain and I’m rushing through vacuum. Wide awake and so far at such speed I flatten into a subatomic contrail. That grand cosmic maw, that eater of galaxies, possesses sufficient gravitational force to rend the fabric of space and time, to obliterate reality, and in I go, bursting into trillions of minute particles, quadrillions of whining fleas, consumed. Nanoseconds later, I understand everything there is to understand. Reduced to my “essential saltes” as it were, I’m the prime mover seed that gets sown after the heat death of the universe when the Ouroboros swallows itself and the cycle begins anew with a big bang.

Meanwhile, back on Earth in the bathroom of the shabby efficiency flat, my body teeters before the mirror. Lacking my primal ichor and animating force that fueled the quasi immortal regeneration of cells that in turn thwarted the perfect pathogen, the latent mutant gene of the Pod People activates and transmogrifies the good old human me into one of Them.

Probably the last self-willed fungus standing—but not for long; this shit does indeed spread like wildfire. My former guts, ganglion, reproductive organs, and whatnot, dissolve into a thick, black stew while my former brain contracts and fossilizes to the approximate size of a walnut and adopts an entirely new set of operating principles.

Doubtless, it has a plan for the world. May it and my android wife be very happy together. I hope they remember to feed the cat.

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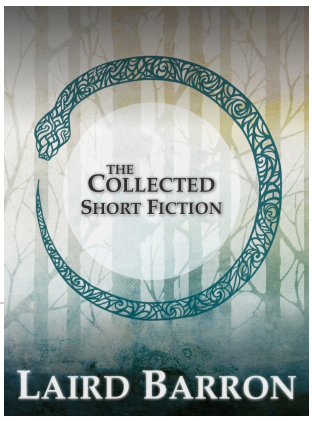

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You know how this is going to end.

—What? He woke, although it was only a slight shift between states of consciousness, an emergence from a lucid dream state. His eyes were already open and focused on a flickering panel. In his ears, rapidly ascending to inaudible decibels, Dracula's organ music, the wheedling peep of a theremin, now the gentle hiss of air through the vents.

—Yes? she said. She didn't look up from the exposed circuit board on her lap. She gripped a soldering gun like a real weapon. Her hatred wasn't fixed upon him at the moment.

—What did you say?

—I didn't say anything.

—I thought—

—Let's see. An hour ago I asked for a caliper. Had to get it myself.

—An hour?

She set aside the soldering gun and waved her hand to disperse the coils of rising smoke. —Forty-eight minutes and change. Sorry.

—You are not. He said this under his breath.

—Excuse me?

All six security feeds went dark. He toggled switches, then tapped the nearest screen with his ring, as if *that* made any sense.

—Problem? she said.

—I've lost all video.

—*Ooo-weee-ooo*, she said in a sinister voice. —Starring Keith David and Jessica Lange: *In a world gone mad, two scientists spend a month in the badlands, haunted by the Ghost of Christmas Past—*

—Laugh now. He smacked the screen again. —You're no Jessica Lange, honey-pie. Me, I'm Sidney Poitier. Except badass.

—Poitier was badass. You're more like Poitier if he were scary-looking.

Feed One remained down, but the others revived in sequence. Feed Two displayed a keyhole perspective of the southeastern quadrant—a sloping field of short, dry grass and scrub brush wavering in the breeze. Feed Three, a vista of pebbly ground and small boulders, Four through Six, a line of trees. Feed One would've revealed the module, their little habitat itself. But the monitor was still dead. It bothered him that Feed One wouldn't work and he kept flipping the switch. Slow-moving clouds passed over the translucent dome and reflected a diamond pattern of shadows on the control boards, the fabric of his coat sleeves.

—Funny thing, she said. —I dreamed this would happen. A couple of nights ago.

—Dreamed what? *Flip, flip, flip.*

—The video monitors went on the fritz. You screwed them up, somehow.

—Did I spill a glass of scotch into the works?

Now she *did* look at him. —Tell me you smuggled in a bottle of single malt.

—In fact, I did. We'll save it for a special occasion. Anyway, I meant that Tommy Billings and his love of booze might've been responsible for the Siberian debacle.

—You're kidding, she said.

—Listen, this is good. I'm surprised you haven't heard. The team was partying at three o'clock in the morning and TB got a little crazy and dumped a full glass of liquor into some circuitry. It started an electrical fire and *whoom!* The site went up like a torch.

—Color me dubious. That's too convenient.

—Less titillating than the espionage rumors, alas.

—Who told you?

—I don't recall. And I was sworn to secrecy.

—The jerk was probably drinking vodka. What with it being a joint project with the Russians. That adds a nice touch of verisimilitude, don't you think?

—Sure, why not? We'll never know. None of them are around anymore. They froze pretty quick.

—If there was no one left to tell the tale… she said.

He said, —…then how come we have the legend of the Manitou? Boy follows stag up a mountain—

She said, —…boy discovers stag ain't no stag. That's easy—it's a *story*. As in a bedtime story. Just like TB killing everybody with a glass of hooch. Although.

—Yeah?

—Accepting the hearsay as true for a moment, if Tommy really did something like that, it might've been on purpose.

—Where do you get that?

—I met him once at a cocktail party. Doctor Toshi Ryoko and the boys had just gotten back from Japan—the Devil Sea thing, I think—and the department threw them a shindig.

—Oh. I wasn't invited.

—I'm shocked! You're such a people person!

—You think Tommy was working for another team?

—Sure, why not? He struck me as the type.

—The type?

—Yeah, you know, an asshole. He was a farm boy who made good.

—No call to hack on farm boys. They're the backbone of this great union.

—Give me a break. Those days are history. One driver on a machine does it all. It'll be robots in a few years. *Steelworkers* are where it's at.

—I'm sure, I'm sure. "Allentown" was a mighty sexy song. So why do you think ill of the late, lamented Tommy Billings? Did you catch him exchanging passwords with an FSB operative by the punch bowl?

—No, it was just subtle things. TB stumbled around all night with a bottle in his fist, dopey as a cow. He was too stupid to be true… he had a shifty

glint in his eyes. Toshi loved him. Toshi collects guys like that. These days he's got this Aussie goon named Beasley to carry his spears. Ex-rugby star, or something. Ugly, but sort of beautiful too. I know a girl in the Denver office who balled him. She was pretty high on the whole experience.

—Toshi. You're on a first name basis with him? Cozy. Got a key to his chateau, do you? No wonder you're on the fast track.

—Don't be jealous. I don't think Toshi likes girls. He's married to the media frenzy, and busting the chops of all those academic enemies he's made.

—Jealous? I'm so far beyond all that, you don't even know. Since they'd broken it off after the job in the Sierras, he'd said this very thing to himself so many times it had become a fact.

—Getting your money's worth out of your therapist?

He laughed again. It was growing harder not to match her naked antipathy, and it had only been eighteen days. Twenty, if one counted the flight from Seattle to Yakima and the interminable briefing, then the ninety-minute chopper transport into the hills. He said, —She keeps the top two buttons of her blouse undone. I cannot complain.

—Liar. You've been watching those straight-to-video flicks starring Shannon Tweed. You poor lonely bastard.

—I'm going to retrieve the footage at B5 and B6. He stood and stretched, and opened the gun cabinet. He checked the action on the rifle, a sleek 7mm with a Leopold scope, and slung it over his shoulder. —Be back in a jiffy.

—Do try to return before dark, or I won't let you in.

—I'll hustle. Gonna be chilly tonight.

She wasn't listening.

The module was a hemisphere nestled in a clearing among sagebrush and junipers. It was constructed of composite plastic with viewports of thick, shatterproof glass, and segregated into several compartments. The module was designed to function as a self-sufficient habitat, sturdy enough to withstand vast temperature swings and powerful winds that howled out of the northwest from the high desert. Lights and surveillance equipment were powered by a pair of generators and, because this was an inordinately sunny

part of the state, a battery of solar panels. Thus, all the comforts of home: TV, microwave dinners, solitaire on the sadly outdated computer, even very brief showers. A thousand gallons of water sat in storage. The chemical toilets were designed to separate solid and liquid waste. Garbage was incinerated, composted in the tiny hydroponics cubicle, or packaged to be shipped home during resupply. This was a minor, but long-term operation. The pair would stay for six months conducting field work, then rotate with the next team.

He shut the entry hatch. He wore a camouflage jumpsuit with a heavy belt. On the belt: canteen, knife, walkie-talkie, and a pouch containing waterproof matches, a screw-on flashlight, a compass, antivenin, and trail mix. In his left hand he carried a rucksack containing batteries and tapes for the remote cameras.

The Family's ranch sprawled for thousands of acres under skies that, come sunset, darkened like blood edged in molten gold. Homesteaders grabbed every parcel they could lay hands on during the 1880s when dirt was cheap. Not that it resembled a ranch—nor had it functioned as one since the 1960s when the Family took it over. Cowboys would refer to the vista as rough country, an expanse of rocky steppes, and canyons, and in the near distance, limestone ridges that gradually built into mountains. A coyote behind every bush, a rattlesnake under every rock. At night, the stars shone bright and cold, and he could count the pits and cracks in the moon, it hung so full and yellow.

Not far south, things were greener, softer; the original settlers raised cattle and horses, once upon a time. Headquarters provided him an assortment of area maps—according to these, a road cut the property in half and connected it to the nearest town, forty-five kilometers south. HQ told him not to worry about ground transportation. Supplies would be brought in by helicopter and, in the event of emergency, he and she would be airlifted to safety.

He adjusted the timer on his watch and headed northeast, toward the mountains. A horse would've been nice—a big, soft-eyed pinto to carry him through this Howard Hawks landscape. At least he'd the smarts to bring an appropriate hat instead of the god-awful baseball caps and sun visors the CSIs wore. The hat was of crumpled, sun-bleached leather and it once

belonged to a vaquero who worked in Texas. The vaquero went home to Mexico to be with his wife when she gave birth, and bequeathed him the hat as a token of friendship. It chafed his ears because it was hard as an old leather football left to dry in the mud. He took it off and beat it against his knee, used it to sop the sweat streaming from his face. Once the oils of his flesh got in there, it would loosen and fit his head.

He walked.

The coyote den was located amid the root system of a copse of shaggy pines. Its size and elaborateness still surprised him. Generally, coyotes chose to lair among rocks if they couldn't co-opt the abandoned shelters of other animals. His work here proved a bit more intrusive than he preferred. He'd installed cameras to monitor den entrances. The cameras were encased in waterproof boxes and mounted on trees. After days of zero activity, despite his squirting synthetic musk on nearby bushes, he resorted to inserting a probe into the den—the probe was a flexible tube attached to a braincase. The case was affixed to a wooden stand. He spent hours manipulating the device, mapping the labyrinthine interior via the infrared eye ring. Ultimately, he positioned the eye in a central burrow and programmed the VCR to record at certain intervals throughout a twenty-four-hour cycle.

The company spared no expense for equipment, and he'd lain awake the past two and a half weeks turning that over in his mind. In his experience, corporations were loath to part with a penny more than circumstances absolutely required—the crappy computer in the module, and the lack of a jeep or four-wheeler, as exhibits A and B. The exception to this rule being the opportunity for great profit, or in the interest of mitigating some potential risk to their reputation. The government wanted people here, had selected his company of all the best North American subcontractors, to perform studies and collect data, but their motives remained unclear. Need to know, they said. It was enough for him to track and film and file the reports. The whole thing was likely on the level. What else could it be, anyway? Nonetheless, he found it simplest to distrust people until proven wrong, a product of spending most of his adulthood dwelling alone in shanties and shacks, of lying motionless in a thousand lonely coverts, spying upon the beasts of the woods.

He changed the batteries on all of the cameras and swapped out the cassettes. There was still time, so he withdrew the probe and spent an hour navigating it into an entrance on the opposite flank of the den. Then he sat in the shade and drank some water and chewed a handful of trail mix, and wondered why, despite the heat, a chill tightened the muscles in his shoulders and neck. He glanced around with affected casualness. The trees shifted in a mild breeze. A cloud partially occulted the sun.

Without question, spoor indicated several coyotes lurked in the vicinity. Bizarrely, the tracks didn't approach the den, but rather circled it, and he envisioned them creeping about the bushes, fearful, yet inexorably drawn and entrapped by simple fascination. This was beyond his twenty years of experience in the wild. Certainly one would expect an extended family to dwell inside such a massive den. He found its desertion, the haunted house quality, disquieting to say the least.

This disquiet, this aura of strangeness, permeated the entire northern sector of the range. The patterns were off, the behaviors of fauna uncharacteristic. The other day a hawk fell from the sky, stone dead. He'd seen gophers curled up in the middle of a field, oblivious; a murder of crows had slipped from hidden roosts and followed him for several kilometers as he scouted the surroundings. The birds swooped and circled in utter silence. The preceding CSI team had witnessed even more disturbing things—a pack of coyotes sitting patiently beyond the campsite, and a black bear that watched from the cover of a juniper. After a couple of days stalking them, the bear walked right into camp, grabbed one of the techs by the arm, and tried to drag him away. They shot it and sent its head to the lab. The CSI team decided it must be rabid. No rabies, though. Just a fat and healthy five-year-old boar with devilry on its mind. And that's why he carried a rifle.

The canyon wasn't far. Its jagged walls averaged a height of ten meters. A stream trickled along its floor where squirrels and mice nested in the heavy clusters of brush; numerous bird species, including thrush, gray catbirds, and canyon wren, occupied the mossy crevices above. Red-tail hawks and great horned owls hunted the area.

He picked his way through the boulders and alder snags. Sunlight was blocked by the narrow walls and overhanging bushes. It was cold. The open range, its long sweeps of baked dirt, seemed a world removed as he traveled

farther into the shadows. He carried the rifle in his right hand, against his hip. He would've been happier with a shotgun in the brush where matters could escalate in seconds. There was no bear sign—and he'd been most scrupulous in ascertaining that detail. Still, he couldn't shake his unease. He'd noted it from day one, put it down to heebie-jeebies from the stories in the paper, the briefings and the short film recovered from Site 3. After all that, he went to a bar and drank the better part of a bottle of Maker's Mark, as if that might obliterate what he'd seen. Site 3 lay a kilometer west where the foothills verged on mountainous. The forensics people referred to the area as The Killing Grounds. The excavation had dragged on for three weeks and the teams only verified the presence of half a dozen bodies. The forensics experts estimated more, probably *many* more, victims had decomposed beyond detection, much less retrieval. Eleven sites total, but the economy was crashing like the *Hindenburg* and the state was too broke to keep digging. He thought maybe *afraid* to keep digging was closer to the truth.

He'd left a pair of cameras trained on a small pool. There were significant animal signs in the immediate vicinity—they'd captured footage of mice and birds, and a bobcat on its nightly prowl. The bobcat sat there by the water, its eyes shiny and strange, and finally it zeroed in on the second camera, which was fairly well camouflaged, and stared—stared for exactly eleven minutes until the machine clicked off. He could only speculate how long the cat waited in the dark. Then he thought of the bear and tightened his grip on the rifle.

When he reached the covert, the cameras were missing.

He arrived home after dark, and she had indeed locked the hatch. He knocked and she let him in anyway. The central space, their work area, was lighted by the warm, mellow glow of three accent lamps she stowed in her luggage. Fluorescent lighting made her edgy—she claimed to have suffered a near breakdown during an expedition into a remote region of the Pyrenees.

He unpacked the cassettes and piled them on her desk for processing. Processing film was her main task, although as a geologist with specialties in zoology and insect ecology, it likely chafed. As the amount of data to sift was paltry thus far, she spent a portion of her days investigating the

immediate environs. She showed him one of a series of jars she'd collected that afternoon.

—Even the insects are acting weird, she said. She slowly turned the jar, and the wasps slid across its killing floor, wings fluttering. The glass stifled their complaints, a ghostly buzzing.

—How weird are they?

—Completely, totally fucked up.

He considered mentioning the missing cameras. The idea dissolved even as it formed. —How so?

—Their hive is in the trees south of here. Huge sucker. *Cecidostiba semifascia* crawling everywhere. On the trees, the bushes, all over the ground. Thousands and thousands. Millions. It's like a nest of driver ants exploded. None of them fly. Scores were clumping together and dropping to the ground, like ripe apples. So creepy.

—What the hell is that about? he said.

—Beats me, man. It only gets screwier.

—Wonderful.

—When I first started watching, I was repulsed. Recalling them squirming over each other kind of sickens me too. Only thing is—for a few minutes, all that discomfort morphed into… well, fascination. I was—Christ, how do I explain. I was attracted to the scene. Being a passive observer wasn't enough. Suddenly, I had to participate in the, well, in the whatever thing these insects were doing. Goddamned orgy. I scooped a whole bunch of them into the specimen jars… and then…

He leaned into the counter. The rhythm of her voice enervated him. He said, —What did you do?

—Man, I sat down at the edge of their swarm. The fuckers started climbing on me. They found pant openings, cuffs, my collar, and crawled inside, got tangled in my hair. I had to pinch my nose to block them, close my mouth to keep them out.

—Hmm, he said.

—I should’ve been stung to death. She pressed her cheek to the jar and tilted it so the wasps seemed to spill over her eye. Her hand shook. —Then, it was getting dark. Cold. They peeled from me, crawled away to their tree, the hive. Some just burrowed into the pine needles. Pretty soon, every last one was gone. The enormity of the situation hit me. I ran the whole way back here.

He watched her play with the jar until she set it aside and stuck her hands into the pockets of her coat. He said, —I’m going to make myself a sandwich. Want me to open you a can of something?

—Peanut butter crackers, she said.

—We’ve Spam, and more Spam.

—We don’t have peanut butter?

—You gobbled up the bucket. I don’t think HQ could’ve anticipated your peanut butter fetish.

—Spam and crackers. There’s another thing.

—The wasps aren’t enough?

—I’ve heard knocking on the hatch. Two nights this week. Woke me from a dead sleep. Very soft, kind of tapping. Yeah, probably my imagination. Only problem with that is, I know what knuckles on metal sound like.

—Okay, he said, rolling his eyes.

—Oh, yeah? I’m not an idiot.

—I’ll reserve judgment until we check the perimeter footage. Somebody’s sneaking around, we’ll see.

They didn’t screw, which initially was a bit of a surprise to him until he heard her vibrator buzzing one night. Their sexual rift was acceptable—some of her kinks unnerved him. So he fiercely masturbated to images of early Playmate-era Shannon Tweed, and fell asleep.

He dreamed of his fellow scientist sitting lotus style among the torpid wasps. Her jumpsuit was dark with them. The sun hid behind the mountains and stained the sky a rich red that was almost black—the color that wells from a deep wound. The red light spattered her, dripped from her. She began stuffing handfuls of wasps into her mouth.

He awoke and lay on his cot, overcome by a sense of claustrophobia. Horrors skittered and scuttled at the fringes of his consciousness, feverish impressions that afflicted children with a fear of the dark. He listened to her working on the other side of the thin fabric wall. She clicked steadily at a keyboard and the dim, blue light from her monitor flickered on his ceiling.

She gasped, and said, —Holy shit. What the fuck.

He almost rose, almost went into the other room to ask what she'd seen. Another wave of weariness bore down upon him and his eyelids fluttered, and he was gone again, falling into a sea of red.

In the morning he made good on his promise to troll for suspicious activity on the tapes. There was nothing, of course.

He darted a mule deer and tagged it with a GPS chip. That was the most excitement he'd had since his arrival, and it was short lived. Within hours, the deer traveled deeper into the hills beyond his research radius. He waited three days and then moved the cameras at the den to sector C1, a prairie rife with rabbits and groundhogs. The backbreaking job left him caked in dirt and exhausted. He returned to the module and fixed a huge meal, chewed aspirin, and drank a quart of water. He sprawled on the floor, dressed in shorts, feet propped on a chair.

She said, —What's it called when you can't remember if you dreamed an event, or if it actually happened?

—Crazy?

—Yesterday I was lying in the hammock—

—I saw you'd strung one over there by that fir. Must be nice to have free time. I'll think of you whenever I'm travois-ing three hundred pounds of shit across the rocks.

—No, no, I'll be swinging in my hammock thinking of *you*, she said. —I made myself a pitcher of pink lemonade. Yummy.

—There you were, lying naked in your hammock—

—Sure, why not? There I was, sipping lemonade, watching the clouds, and someone called my name. I almost peed myself. Probably for the best I don't pack heat—I'd have blasted the living crap outta some bushes.

—If you thought the bushes were talking to you, I think we should analyze the lemonade.

—I'm telling you, somebody stage-whispered my name from behind a juniper. Heard it clear as can be. I sort of froze, not quite accepting the situation. Of course it occurred to me you were playing one of your practical jokes. I also knew in the next instant it wasn't. This was way different. It didn't sound friendly, either. Whoever it was snickered.

—Are you kidding? You thought it was me? I'm hurt.

—For a second or two. Who else? Don't get your nose out of joint.

—It's a common phenomenon, the phantom voice. That's your subconscious looking for attention. Happened to me a lot when I got rummy, scrunched into a blind or tree stand. Get tired enough, you see and hear things that aren't there.

—But, I'm not tired.

—Yeah, however, we *are* isolated. Like I said, the mind gets bored and plays games. Don't sweat it too much.

She said, —I had another dream last night.

—A wet one?

—Don't be nasty. Yeah, okay, maybe. The other one—not so nice. It was sunset. Just about the most hideous redness covered everything. Made my eyes hurt. The light seeped from the sky, cracks in the earth, until I couldn't see anything but shadows and blurry outlines of figures. People sort of appeared and gathered around me. Maybe they weren't human.

—It being a dream, he said.

—My God, you are a jerk. I hate smug guys.

—If you were a model you could file that under turnoffs: smug guys!

—I *was* a model.

—Really?

—No. My sister was, though. I'm way better looking than her.

—Meh, you're all right. Your teeth are too big.

—Jerk, jerk, jerk! Why did I say yes to this stupid assignment?

—The obvious answer would be…

—Grow up. We had a thing and so what? I bet you've humped a half-dozen sleazy little bitches since we called it quits.

—At least.

—At least?

—I lost count after ten.

—That's a hell of a lot of money to blow on whores, so to speak. Besides, you're a liar. I doubt half your stories come close to the dreary, mundane truth. The man, the myth. I call bullshit.

He laughed. —Tell me more about your dream, he said in a thick accent. —Vas your mudder involved?

—No. I didn't recognize anyone. I was terrified, so I ran. The red light blinded me and I tripped and fell into a pit. Kept falling and falling until the sky became a pinhole, and finally not even that.

—Is that when you woke?

—I don't think I ever did, she said. —Everything went black. Like the movies.

He limped across a plain that stretched beneath a wide, carnivorous sky. He'd run a great distance and was on his last legs; his breath was ragged, his boots crunched on gravel. Red light flooded the horizon. This was the light of a thin atmosphere, Martian light. He stumbled upon a cluster of low, earthen mounds. The mounds were brown and covered in fine, white dust. He thought this might be a native burial ground, a sacred place, and that had to be the cause of his fear. He'd trespassed and the spirits were furious, the spirits were going to punish him.

He realized his mistake soon enough when he came to a crater. Someone had stuck a shovel in the nearby pile of fresh dirt. At the bottom of the pit were arranged scores of plastic tarps, each wrapped around an object the size and shape of a human form. Among these forms were ruined bicycles, discarded coats, hats, and backpacks. Dresses, bits of costume jewelry, handbags, and wallets.

She said, —Psst! I wasn't being straight with you earlier.

The bloody light of the sky winked out of existence. His sleeping cubicle was pitch black. He shuddered at the sound of her breathing nearby. His chest hurt and he massaged his ribs, thinking, here came the heart attack that felled his father, and his father's father, and several uncles, hardy woodsmen all. Like them, he smoked and drank too much. Like them, he suffered night terrors.

—I *did* hear a voice, she said, her mouth centimeters from his own. —Not a phantom voice, either. Whoever it was, whatever I heard, it whispered my name. Then it asked me where you were. *Where's your friend? Where's your friend? Where's your friend?*

His eyes watered. He put his hand over his mouth to stifle a sob, shocked at the power of his compulsion to scream. He couldn't remember if his dream was only a dream, or the reenactment of something he'd witnessed and immediately repressed. His father shot several people in Vietnam and said that he couldn't always separate his nightmares from things that really happened. She didn't say anything else and exhaustion descended like a club and smashed him into unconsciousness.

He climbed a ridge and stood in the shade of an oak. Its leaves were broad and dusty. Near the toe of his left boot was a snare of barb wire still attached to a post. Ants boiled from the rotten core of the wood. He removed his hat and hung it on a branch. Flies buzzed, drawn to the moisture. He sipped canteen water and scratched the deep itch at the center of his skull. The longer he watched the ants, the more intensely his brain itched.

He unsnapped the protective covers of his field glasses and used one hand to cup them to his eyes. Below the ridge, a basin spread for a half-kilometer to the foot of the mountains. Washboard ruts, decayed remnants of several abandoned roads, zigzagged through scrub and rocks. A stream ambled its crooked way toward the lowlands. His map designated this area as the infamous Site 3. The original ranchers lived to the extreme southern extents of the property—their homes nearest the city were converted to low-income housing, or bulldozed for school soccer fields and parks. After the last of the ranchers' lines died off in 1965, the cattle and horses were auctioned and the vast acreage returned swiftly to wilderness. The Family hadn't arrived until 1969 or 1970 and their presence wouldn't have altered much.

The shacks they'd squatted in had long since fallen apart, and they'd moved from place to place, migrating like nomads across the property in a pair of antiquated school buses.

—Oh, the places we'll go, he said, lowering the glasses.

—Eh? What are you on about? she said.

He didn't recall dialing her on the cell, but there the phone was pressed to his ear, and her sounding belligerent on the other end. —I'm looking at Site 3. Nice place to build a house, raise some kids. A tad on the dry side.

—A tad on the creepy side, you mean. Seems like you're the one with idle hands now. Shouldn't you be staking out a coyote den, or sniffing deer droppings?

—I'm munching on some at this very moment, he said. —Did I mention my great-great-great grandfather rode with Kit Carson? Why'd you call? Everything okay?

—You called me, silly. Yeah, I'm going through the tapes. There's not much on them. Three, count 'em, three freakin' coyotes in B5 and B6. No further visuals on the bobcat, and not a single bear. Did you scare all the animals?

—You sure are ornery today.

—I'm ornery every day; you're too busy playing Boy Scout to notice, is all.

—Ri-i-ght—I'm tramping through the woods while you're barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen. How's supper coming?

—Spam and beans. You'll get it cold if you don't take a shower, buster.

He touched the post and a few ants scurried onto his fingers. —Don't get rid of the packing jelly.

—Ugh. You like the Spam afterbirth? I can't believe I let you kiss me on the mouth.

—Spam placenta, if you please. He raised the binoculars. A brown shape separated from the cover of sage and trotted across open ground. The coyote was a scrawny specimen. —Fuck. Maybe there *is* a rabies outbreak.

—The ones on tape are definitely off. You gotta take a look. My theory is rabies, or a man-made agent. Something toxic. Hunters might've poisoned the water. There's a bounty on coyote heads in this region.

—We've lived here, what, a month? You spot any hunters? Nobody's coming this far into the boonies to bag a few coyotes.

—There's another possibility. Government isn't above testing its latest bio weapons on animal populations. The risk to humans is low. The Army could've dosed the area five, ten years ago. Now we're here checking on their work, all unwitting like.

—Thanks for brightening my day, sunshine.

—My advice is, don't drink the water.

—Got it.

—Super. Back to the horrors. She broke the connection.

He slipped the phone into his pocket and shook his wrists, flinging ants into oblivion. His lips were cracked. Thick, coarse stubble covered his jaw. He kept forgetting to shave. Personal hygiene was the first thing to go when he settled into the bush. Animals could smell chemical products all too readily. Gun oil was trouble enough.

A half-hour later, he'd carefully picked his way down the hillside and walked across the basin to the former CSI team campsite. The team pulled stakes months before. Signs of its presence were mostly erased by the elements, the proliferation of weeds. He flipped an empty soda bottle with the side of his foot. There was a fire pit, its ashes washed to gray mud and baked hard, and nothing else. This was where the team of fourteen men, women and dogs spent the better part of a month taking core samples and ground X-rays, sniffing for elements of organic decay, and snapping a thousand photographs. Yes, she was right—definitely creepy. He was glad their own camp was at a good, safe distance. It was irrational, and that didn't bother him. In the animal kingdom, paranoia equaled sanity.

Why had he come to Site 3? No reason except curiosity, an overwhelming urge to reconcile his curiosity and fear. Fear was such a strong word, yet an appropriate one. That he carried a weapon and was trained to survive any

conceivable scenario, that there was no visible threat, did nothing to pacify his mounting anxiety.

He was alone in the wilderness, yet when he spied the set of human tracks, he wasn't surprised. He followed for a while—the prints of a large male in boots were made within the last seventy-two hours. The trail eventually led into the hills. The Family's hideout lay in that direction: long-gone tepees, tarpaper shacks, and caves. He looked at the sky. Sunset creeping along, it would arrive within forty-five minutes. He told himself discretion was the better part of valor and turned away.

Later that night a storm rolled in as he lay awake, listening to the wind tear at the module. —You fool, he said. —There's not a damned thing to be afraid of. He closed his eyes and slept. In his dreams, he stood in a field and regarded the carcass of a black bear. The bear lay on its side in several inches of jellified gore. Green rot wafted and a cloud of blowflies orbited the remains. From his angle he couldn't tell if the head had been chopped off. A woman laughed and her hand clamped upon his shoulder. The hand was all rawhide and bone.

He spent the next day in a tree on the ridge overlooking Site 3. The branches were steamy from rain, but the stony earth had already drunk the puddles and pools. A hawk circled so far overhead it was a black grain against the superheated blue sky. A couple of coyotes padded along the basin floor. He contemplated shooting one, removing its blood and tissues and shipping them to HQ for analysis. He replaced the bunting lens caps on his rifle scope, and drowsed. When the light thickened and dimmed he lowered himself to the ground and walked back to camp.

—There's no video of… of you know what, she said.

Stars cluttered the sky and the air was almost too crisp. They sat on lawn chairs at the edge of a dying fire. They smoked cigarettes from her carton of Pall Malls and drank many tumblers from his bottle of Laphroaig. A light wind swirled from the mountains and stirred the fire, occasionally scattering cinders upon their clothes. The wind tasted sweet, like ashes of a green tree.

—Of what happened at S3? A guy showed it to me, all right, he said. A third of the scotch was in his belly. He didn't care if she believed him. He thought about the two ragged coyotes, the circling hawk, the coyote den

empty as a forgotten mausoleum. He thought about the lone set of boot prints winding among the rocks, impressions coagulated in the soft earth. He wondered what it all meant.

—A guy? What guy?

—I don’t remember his name. He was with somebody. Oh, yeah, Bleeker, or Blecher. One of the CSIs. I think.

—Bleeker showed you a video.

—Not Bleeker. The guy with Bleeker. Lab rat type. Pasty, soft.

—Bleeker’s pal showed you a video.

—The Site 3 home video that those freaks shot in ’72.

She puffed on her cigarette. The light from the fire glowed red in her eyes.

—When did this happen? We were sitting together at the briefing.

—During the lunch break. He took me to an empty conference room and played it against one of those pull-down screens.

—The dude was walking around with the tape in his pocket?

—Maybe he’s stalking Michael Moore. Gotta be ready to demo at the drop of a hat, right?

—*The Religious Freaks and Me.* But, the lunch break was like only fifteen minutes.

—The film was a short-short.

—Well, hell. Now I know where you went to smoke a cigarette. Wish I’d followed you.

—No, you don’t.

—The Family didn’t film anything. That’s an urban legend. No photographs, either. Buncha dirt-munching, tree-hugging druids. I hear one of ’em worked in the Army motor pool before he got a Section Eight. Crazy fucker kept the school buses running. Otherwise, homeboys didn’t have a pot to piss in, much less a camcorder. If you actually watched anything, it was a fake. Guy was yanking your chain.

—It looked authentic. Really horrible.

—Um-hm. She extended her glass and he poured. —I take it there was some Dario Argento-style mayhem going on.

He filled his own tumbler until whiskey quivered at the rim, and closed his eyes and considered her voice, how it lately came to him deep in the darkness when he was alone on his cot. Her voice was breathy and harsh, like a breeze combing through dry leaves, a raspy lullaby. He said, —You're right. It was a hoax. Hamburger and catsup in papier-mâché dummies. Smack that shit with a sledgehammer, watch it splat against a wall. Fooled the hell out of me.

—Catsup?

—Corn syrup and chocolate, he said. —I was a baby when the Family made the scene. Rabbits and wolves are more my thing. Starvation, predator/prey dynamics, I understand. Rabies, I understand. This psychobabble, religious bullshit, not a damned bit.

—Not me. I loooved my psych classes. People, bugs. Step back far enough, it's all the same. I did a midterm paper on the cult. Honestly, I was kinda sweet on the D.A. He came to the university and lectured us about the case. Real sexy older guy. I wasn't paying much attention to what he said, but luckily my dorm mate was pathological about taking notes. Anyhow, what they did was lure kids from parks and concerts. The Old Man sent his followers to train stations and bus depots on the lookout for runaways, war vets, anybody down and out and desperate for a meal, a place to crash. The Family brought 'em here, to the ranch.

—And then?

—And then? She smiled and threw back her head so her hair fanned over one shoulder. —I dunno. Mostly sat around eating peyote buttons and reading those anti-establishment pamphlets Father wrote by the bushel. Fucking and dancing to wild flute music. Some of the visitors converted, joined the cause. The shit that went down in Portland—

—At the retirement home.

—The Pleasant View Massacre. Yeah. Three of the four killers had joined the Family the preceding year. Probational members. A lot of the indigents stayed awhile and then moved on. How many wound up getting tortured and murdered? A few. Gets a mite boring in these parts, I reckon.

He watched her closely, drawn to the way she rubbed the glass against her collarbone, how perspiration gleamed there. The whiskey in his own glass lay black as blood. He gritted his teeth and took it all in a gulp.

—You figure, the Family had a following in the hundreds during the late ’60s. At least double *that* left or disappeared. I think, in my heart of hearts, you can take all the death scores by Dahmer, Bundy, Gacy, that crowd—and add ’em together. What’s buried on this range is probably way worse. Plain old math.

—But why?

—Thrills. The core group were anarchists, the kind who want to watch the world burn. I bet a lot of unpleasant talk occurred around the campfire. Those who heard the gospel and acted squeamish got the ax, literally. I also think the Family was paranoid about Fed narks infiltrating the ranks. Motive enough to bury a few.

—Could be another reason. You called them anarchists. They weren’t anarchists, they were a cult. Satanists.

She finished her whiskey and regarded the glass. —Damn, you had to go and do that, didn’t you? Here we are, miles from civilization and you gotta suggest those freaks were sacrificing people to the Devil.

—Would it have been more acceptable if they were splitting people open to satisfy Jehovah? Wasn’t thrill-killing scary enough for you?

—I hadn’t thought of it like that. Satanism freaks me the fuck out.

—No need to be scared, baby. We’ve the computer, a radio, cell phones. We’re wired.

—Lot of help that shit will be if cultists sneak in and cut our throats in the dead of night. I don’t need any more nightmares.

—Wanna cuddle? I’ll protect you from the bogeymen.

—Thanks anyway. Sadist.

The coals faded and after a while, the two sat hunched, separated by a gulf of darkness. She began to reminisce about the good old days in college, how her parents disapproved of her career in biology; lawyers both, they’d expected her to attend an Ivy League school and carry on the family tradition. Her mother had died last year of complications from diabetes and

her father remarried a drunken witch who really, really enjoyed money. Stepmom was evil incarnate, of course.

—I always hated my real mom, she said. —Worse than evil stepmom, even. You haven't asked about the puppy you gave me. Rex. I named him Rex.

He wasn't listening.

—Look at this, she said. Neither had dressed after breakfast; just a plain white t-shirt and shorts for him; an Army gray sports bra and faded green panties for her. Rain spackled the dome and the humidity didn't do much to soothe his hangover. —I meant to play this for you earlier.

—Well, why didn't you?

She frowned at the blurry image on her computer monitor. —I dunno. This is footage from the probe at B5. Watch closely, 'cause it happens fast.

His temples throbbed. The image shot by the infrared eye ring was static, taken long after he'd positioned the device. The picture stuttered, revealed a ghostly vista of roots and rock of the den interior. Five or six seconds in, a shape in the frame. A mud-encrusted human face. The person grinned or snarled, perhaps aware of the lens, perhaps not. Either way, he was worming along on his belly. Then the recording ended. —Don't try telling me that's a man, he said.

—Here it comes again. And… freeze.

—No way, he said. —No way. The lighting is so poor. It's a coyote.

—I don't think so, she said.

—Fuck that noise. He leaned over her and killed the recording. —You're going stir crazy. Hit the trail with me today. We'll have a picnic.

—That's a person.

He stroked his beard, mastering the impulse to smash the monitor. He said, —I've spent many precious hours of my life wiring that den. If a human being came within a hundred meters, I would've seen their tracks. I would've seen evidence at one of the entrances. There's nobody hiding in that den.

—For Chrissake, run it again. You'll see.

—Oh, we’re gonna run it again.

She flipped her chair and paced to the opposite end of the enclosure. —Somebody’s crazy, and it’s you.

He started the recording and set it to loop. —Say it with me: It’s a coyote.

—I know how to process film and I know what that is.

—Come here.

—Kiss my ass I’m coming over there.

—Come on.

Her eyes brightened. She went through the hatch and let it slam behind her. He unclenched his fingers and whistled. The creature in the den sneered at him, then vanished, over and over. After a while he decided it actually resembled a feral woman, her lank hair obscuring vulpine features, a mouth twisted in rage. He couldn’t tear his gaze away.

She returned a few minutes later and dressed. She stood next to him and stared at the monitor. Her jaw twitched. —You’re right. It’s a coyote.

—Exactly.

Her face was dark with sunburn and this magnified the shine of her eyes. Her pupils were black holes eating the whites. She said, —Where do you go all day?

The supply helicopter landed in the field at daybreak. The pilot, a wiry man who wore yellow-tinted aviator glasses, briskly unloaded three crates of supplies and handed over a manifest list. The pilot glanced around, nervous as a dog accustomed to dodging rocks. —Cripes, this place is spooky. Good luck. He jumped into the helicopter and zoomed away.

He watched the helicopter make a broad arc. He could grab a rock and chuck it at a rotor. What would happen? In the movies, there’d be a fireball. Shrapnel would sizzle past and shred the module, leaving him unscathed. In the real world? Probably nothing, even in the unlikely event he could actually throw a rock that far. He wondered if he ran inside and got the rifle how many rounds he could fire before the helicopter escaped. It was a bolt action. The magazine held five rounds.

He sighed and hefted his crowbar and began levering apart the crates. She stared after the helicopter until it vanished into the horizon.

Today he changed the tapes in his remote cameras. He carried the tranquilizer gun. He'd decided to zap the first coyote he saw. Unfortunately, none ventured from their lairs by early afternoon, so he enjoyed a long siesta under his favorite tree above the killing grounds. Ants scuttled across his legs. None of them bit him.

He walked into camp a few minutes before sunset and saw it there, leaning against a boulder. He removed his hat and fanned his face, and stared. —I don't understand, he said.

—It's my revenge, she said.

—Revenge about what? he said.

—You're treating me with disrespect. Your asshole-ishness. I'm sick of your eccentricity. Up to here. She made a slashing motion under her chin.

—That's good. Let it all spew out. I really think we're making progress.

She laughed and strode to her trophy. She braced her foot next to it on the boulder and said, —Look at this freakin' thing. I stumbled upon a footpath that leads to a gulch, a bit west of here. A secret path, beaten hard like pavement and screened in juniper and thorn bushes. The trail ended at a cave. Not so much a cave as a deep, vertical crevice. They held ceremonies there. Fuckers left kerosene lanterns hanging from branches and in niches. Wrote a bunch of crazy occult symbols on the walls in chalk and paint. Foul, foul shit, too. I went inside. This was lying, broken, near a big, ugly rock with a groove chiseled into it.

—Must have been a bitch dragging it all the way here, he said. The horn appeared petrified; yellow and gray with streaks of black, like a rotten tooth. Balanced on end it reached his breastbone, and at its thickest, he estimated a circumference equal to his own muscular thigh. —Gotta weigh fifty kilos, easy.

—You aren't the only one who knows how to make a travois, she said.

—I assume you took photographs.

Her mouth ticked in a smile, or a grimace. —Once I saw it, I lost my head… Everything is a blur.

The weird horn, her inconceivable lapse of protocol, stymied his inclination to argue. —So, what else?

—They'd hacked this free from the wall of the cave. There's a glaciated curtain of stone farther back. I didn't bring a flashlight and it was dim… man, there's something huge fossilized in that wall. Maybe ten feet tall. A statue. Has to be. This horn came from whatever's in there.

He brushed his fingers across the horn. His cock stiffened. Saliva poured down his throat. He stepped away from the horn fast. —Good fucking God…

—Yeah, exactly, she said.

He studied the sky, the emerging stars. —Let's grab a lamp and mosey over to this cave of yours.

—No chance in hell, buddy. I won't go back there. Not in the dark.

—Why not?

—Take a good look at that thing. It's obscene.

—Fine. In the morning.

—Okay.

She unzipped his sleeping bag and crawled inside. They fucked. She howled into the pillow, hands locked on the frame of the cot. He rode her in a haze, arm around her hips, lifting her into each slow, savage thrust. It was so good he spent a few dizzy moments in the afterglow confused as to why he'd let the relationship die, and fell asleep while still puzzling. His eyes popped open a bit later when she nuzzled his ear and stuck her finger in his asshole, exactly as she'd done one too many times during their previous affair. He smacked her hand away. She snored, occasionally mumbling. He lay uncomfortably wedged against her, his heart thudding, useless anger kindling in the pit of his gut.

The first knock was faint and he didn't realize what it was until the second one came, slightly louder; a distinct rap against the hatch. He stopped breathing, mouth wide, his entire body an antenna tuned to this most unwelcome vibration at the entrance of the habitat. Then, three sharp knocks. He was on his feet and fumbling for the hunting knife he kept

hanging in its sheath. She didn’t stir, although her muttering became querulous.

Conscious of his nakedness, he crept through the module, navigating the obstacle course of chairs, benches, and crates by the ethereal glow from the monitors. He quickly toggled the security feeds, but they crackled with snowy interference, revealing nothing of the perimeter. He ventured to the mud room, a cramped chamber inside the entrance, designed for removing outdoor gear prior to entering the central compartment. His tongue was thick as leather, and his hands shook, yet a sense of grim exultance drove him forward. Of all the biologists a creep, or creeps, might choose to pick on, he was likely to be the most hostile, if not the most capable of retaliating in a vicious manner.

He crouched against the hatch, pressing his ear to the metal while testing the bar with his free hand. Locked tight. He waited, ticking off the seconds as they built into minutes, and his legs started to cramp. Something scratched against the steel door—nails, a stick. He scuttled on his haunches from the door, knife held reflexively before his eyes. The rifle was nearby in its cabinet and he decided now was an appropriate instance to consider deadly force. Someone laughed and he froze. The scratching came again, then the laughter, farther away. It sounded like two voices. He couldn’t be sure and the darkness became thick and suffocating.

After a while, he gathered the courage to unlimber the rifle and slip outdoors. He padded in a stealthy circuit of the module, stalking from shadow to shadow, finger heavy on the trigger. Wind scuffed up little puffs of dust. When he began to crash from the adrenaline high, he went inside, locked the hatch, and settled in to keep watch until daylight.

She found him sleeping in the fetal position under the table, the rifle clasped to his breast. —Get laid and go back to the Stone Age. Why the hell are you letting all the bugs inside?

The hatch hung ajar. Gnats swarmed in the cold white light of the opening. —The world is large and unknowable, he said.

She stepped into the threshold, her form rendered a black shadow limned by fire. —I lied about the horn, she said. —I made up that stuff to scare you, piss you off. I like telling tales. Whatever. It was lying in the bushes

near an ant nest I've been studying. Been there so long it looked like petrified wood. Animals dug it up, probably. Freaky as fuck no matter how you slice it. She closed the hatch and its clang reminded him of a cage locking.

The only tracks around the module belonged to him and her. As expected, the surveillance footage went offline in conjunction with the nocturnal visitation and the recordings were useless. He waited until she'd gone into the field to check on her ants, or wasps, or what-the-hell-ever she did instead of analyzing tape, and dialed his supervisor in Seattle to deliver the weekly report.

His supervisor was intrigued by the theory that the aberrant wildlife behavior could be linked to poison, although he dismissed the idea of military testing. Hunter activity, on the other hand, was sexy. —I'll send a chopper in next week. Have some water samples ready.

He cleared his throat and said, —My partner may not be handling the stress.

—How so? Are you two having problems?

—She's cracking. He was grateful they weren't speaking via satellite video, acutely aware of his wild, matted hair and beard. —Nothing serious, yet.

—If it's not serious, than what?

—Look, it's difficult to describe. Her work hasn't been stellar. Make a note, is all I'm saying. We get back to civilization, I don't want the blame for shoddy data.

His supervisor sighed. —The Sierras rumor is true, huh? I'm not much of a marriage counselor, but my best advice is if you ever get another opportunity to spend sixty days stranded in the wilds with an ex, pass.

—Thanks. Never mind. An insidious thought surfaced: What if hooking him up with his ex-lover and stranding them in the wilds *was* the whole point of the exercise?

His supervisor said goodbye and good luck.

He sat for a while, observing her on Feed One. She was insubstantial, wandering across the foreground with a stick, flipping over rocks. Looking for bugs. Innocently or not, erasing clues. He thought about the scratching

against the hatch, the faint unearthly lullaby his mother sang when he was a baby and before she left forever. He switched the camera off. He took his rifle and left, muttering about checking his traps as he passed her.

He didn't go far, perhaps two hundred meters into a copse of alder on a nearby hill with a clear view of the camp. Burrowed like a tick deep into the leaves and the dirt, he tenderly wiped moisture from the scope and snugged it to his eye. There she was. A blurred patch of shadow. When he looked through the scope it was as if the largest part of him dissolved and what remained was the kernel everything sprang from. The cathode stole everything, rendered him nameless, a seed floating on a vast cosmic tidal current.

—Where's your friend? he said. Sweat poured into his eyes until the world doubled and distorted like a kaleidoscope. —Where's your friend? Where's your friend?

—You believe in God? She was snapping pictures of the cryptic horn, working it from multiple angles.

He remembered with clear and explicit detail his father walking with him through the reeds where the buck had dropped in its tracks. The buck was alive, its eyes warm with a last, candescent surge of vitality. The marsh was cold and dim. Their collective breath rose like smoke into the black sky. His father handed him the knife.

—Which one? I can get behind the idea of one of those evil cocksuckers the ancients kowtowed to. A few years ago a lost temple was discovered beneath some rainforest. There were caverns with altars to a hideous anthropomorphic beast. Researchers documented dozens of enormous slabs with sluices, for what was literally rivers of blood. There was a primitive sewage system built to handle the gore. Could be they gathered up slaves and enemies and sacrificed thousands at a time during festivals. There's the real deal. That's how a real super being would roll.

—I mean the our Father who art in Heaven.

—Oh, that guy. The Old Testament dude, sure. He'd slept the entire day and dreamed of fleeing through a barren, red-lit landscape. He wore the form of the buck and his father was the hunter.

The afternoon had been brutally hot, and stars undulated as though through warped glass. He felt mentally and spiritually torpid, helpless to make meaningful decisions. It was as if a low-grade sedative pumped through his veins, robbing him of volition; it was the sensation of being trapped in quicksand, or paralyzed in a permanent nightmare. Everything around him was television, and he was acting from a script. He should call HQ and tell them the project had gone off the rails in a major way. He *would* make that call. In a few minutes, once he gathered the ambition to rise from the lawn chair and stumble inside.

She half-straddled the prodigious horn. Her sinewy back gleamed. She'd worn only his hat and a pair of panties the last two days. The sun had scorched her bronze, except for slashes of ivory at her hips and the creases of her buttocks. He too went shirtless since that morning. She chuckled and called him a Nubian stud and flirted with unbuckling his belt until he pushed her away and retreated into his sleeping berth. He didn't think either of them had bathed in several days. Her cheeks were smudged with grime. She appeared wild as an ancient Celt, naked, her hair lank and stiff as if limed for battle. His nails were black and he smelled the ripe sourness of his own body.

—Did you hear the knocking? I bet you did.

He wished for another bottle of scotch. —Yeah.

—Someone wants in.

—I know, he said. —Who?

She grinned at him over her shoulder. She stroked the horn's ridges, dug the inside of her thigh against them until blood welled and ran in a thin trail toward her ankle.

His head felt light and empty. Static hissed like windblown sand somewhere in the depths. —We should bag this job and head home. I'm getting a bad feeling. He turned his gaze from her legs, regarded the stars.

—A bad feeling? You're so primal, so in touch with your roots. I can see you and your homies with spears and loincloths on the savanna.

—Go on, let your hair down, he said. —You're among friends.

—Don't be touchy. It's a fucking compliment.

—Shut up.

She chuckled.

—It’s not as if every single nut case that followed the cult went to the slammer, he said. —What if some of those crazy bastards have come home to the ol’ stomping grounds? Makes me very uncomfortable.

—We’re alone, she said.

—Are we?

—You’ve said so at least a hundred times. Don’t change your story now.

—Only fools and the dead never change their mind.

She turned and walked over and sat beside him. —I haven’t even heard a plane since we got here. Might as well be on the moon. There’s a certain aura, something in the fabric of the land. Feels like an acid trip. Whatever happened to the farmers who settled these parts?

—Ranchers.

—Right, ranchers.

—The original parcel got split and sold to a bunch of local interests. The hardcore folks dwindled, moved away. The grandkids weren’t eager to carry on with the Old West lifestyle. I’m sure they’ll put in a mall or a parking lot. Haha, condos and a retirement center.

—No, she said. —Nothing will be built. They’ll be sorry if they do. I think you’re wrong about the ranchers, by the way. Did you research it, or just accept what we got spoon fed at the briefing?

—I was a baby bird. Cheep, cheep.

—Me too, buddy-boy. Me too. I’ve been pondering it more lately. I bet anything, if you were to dredge up a hundred and twenty years’ worth of newspaper articles, county documents, federal reports and local folklore, you’d get a completely different perspective. Murder, lynching, rape…

—Which would be typical of much of rural, agricultural America, he said.

—Oh, sure. Except here, you’ll find it was epidemic. The cowpokes and their kin were probably crazy as shithouse rats by the time the second generation outgrew diapers. Society kept its mouth shut, of course. Glossed over the frequency, downplayed all but the most sensational atrocities. I’ve

seen it in more genteel settings. This shit's happened since when. I think the Family came because like attracts like. They were drawn by lunatic music only the Devil's own can hear. Yeah, man, no way to ever be sure, but I'd put money that the sickos were nothing more than the latest victims of Hell Range.

—Pretty insane, he said.

—That's how this would go if it was a horror flick, she said.

—Scripting one?

—There's this producer in L.A. who says I'm talented.

—Him fucking you and you actually being able to write are two different things.

—Nah, he's ugly as sin. My sister, the model, he did fuck her. Got her a gig doing hand lotion spots. Silly bitch's face only appears for like two milliseconds. I believe in God.

—Yeah?

—Because I know who that horn belongs to. Can't have one without the other.

He didn't say anything.

—C'mon, can't you feel it? she said.

—Can't *you* feel it when something should remain unspoken? Most cultures consider that a survival trait.

—Beware of Things Man Is Not Meant to Know? I don't fear the immensity of the universe. Some things are too big to worry about. I'm highly credulous.

Once, when he was much younger, he'd walked across an ice-locked expanse of the Bering Sea and comprehended his insignificance. — Chickens have a twenty-minute memory. We primates cope through booze and denial. Dial up more of that denial part, you'll last longer.

—We all end up in the fire, anyway. This friend of mine told me a story. He was raised in Kansas on a farm. He told me his older brother met Satan. Billy Bob was riding his tractor one miserably hot afternoon and the Devil

was sitting on a stump at the end of a row. Fire engine red, horns, tail, pitchfork stuck in the ground. The Devil said, *Hi, Billy Bob.*

—And? I'm on the edge of my seat here.

—I dunno. My pal couldn't get anything else from his brother. His bro was one of those sullen, salt o' the earth types. You, know, the kind I despise. He only mentioned it when he was drunk as a skunk and preached the Rapture.

—Probably didn't know what came next because he'd cooked his brains sitting on the tractor one too many summers. Now full darkness was upon them and they were two lumps of shadow, side by side.

—When I saw the horn, kinda peeking out of the dirt, ants swarming over it, this feeling, a shock, hit me. A moving picture, a sick, sick black and white movie, clicked on in my mind. I wanted to sit in the dirt and keep replaying it. This morning I watched you sleeping and the movie started again. For a few seconds I got why our cult friends went to the nursing home and went wild. I really, really understood.

He couldn't see her face. He didn't know what to do with her, so he pretended not to hear. —My father was a woodsman, he said. —After Mom died, he disappeared into the Olympic National Forest with a backpack and his dog. He made a ramshackle camp in the heart of the forest and lived there about eighteen months. He had cancer and he didn't want to go on without his wife, so he did what the mountain men used to do. He went into the wilderness to die. Animals ate him. Only the bones were left.

—That's a beautiful story, she said. —My dad's fat as a cow and farts his way through CNN and tournament poker sixteen hours a day. I wish a wild animal would eat him.

The buck, the knife. Him trudging across the ice, in the distance a steel-gray wall closing fast. There wasn't anything left to say, so they sat as if shackled to their chairs until the full moon floated to the surface of the sky like a corpse buoyed and bloated by its decomposition. The moon was yellow as a skull. He imagined it resembled the skulls of any of the people who'd ended their days at the bottom of a hole on this ranch. The skull moon resembled their own future selves, he was certain.

It rained hard for two days and they cooped in the module, she entering reports into the computer, he descaling the live traps and foothold traps he'd

left hanging outside from a rack. The climate was harsh and limescale built quickly. She didn’t say much, didn’t come into his compartment again. She’d gone cold. Her eyes were strange and she sat for hours staring into the monitor, hands motionless on the keyboard. He realized he’d become afraid of her. This paranoia was exacerbated by flu symptoms, the sense of terrible vulnerability. His muscles ached, the strength drained from them. He spent hours on the toilet, bowels convulsing. The damned pilot had obviously brought them the gift of plague from town.

On the third morning, the weather cleared and he slipped away and lit out for the hills without saying goodbye. Crows roosted in the trees, and they alighted on the wet earth as he passed. The birds hopped from bush to bush in dreadful silence, following him in a dark train. He plodded directly to the coyote den, tranquilizer gun in hand, his mind mostly blank. Coyotes had been in the vicinity; their sign was sparse, but recent. He leaned against a tree and concentrated on blending into the scenery, willing one of his furry friends to make an appearance. His brain itched for a cigarette and he bought himself time by promising to smoke at least two if he remained stoic for an hour, three should he strike gold and nail his quarry.

It wasn’t like him to fidget, to chafe at the sweat on his neck, to twitch at every gnat bite and mosquito prick. Dad taught him better, taught him to sink into himself and leave the body an insensate shell, a blind within a blind. He was going to pieces. Inside of twenty minutes his nerve endings were on fire. A coyote appeared, moving unhurriedly, nose to the ground. He raised the gun without hesitation and fired. The coyote yelped, jaws snapping at its flank where the dart penetrated. He chambered another round and the little beastie was gone, fled like smoke into the shadows of the trees.

—Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! He leaped to pursue, charged into the underbrush, and this too was contrary to a lifetime of character. Branches gored his arms, drew blood from his cheek. He shouted more obscenities, roared like a bull. The coyote had vanished, and after half a kilometer, he stood on the edge of a prairie, lungs burning, sparks pin-wheeling across his vision. He bellowed at the sky, seized the gun by its stock and hurled it with all his might. The gun arced, end over end, like a tomahawk, and smashed to pieces against the hard ground.

He kept walking, tears stinging the scratches on his cheek, matting his beard. The chopper had crashed behind a hill in a shallow ravine. He recognized the vehicle instantly. There hadn’t been a fire and it was largely intact. Crows perched on the bent tail rotor, and the mangled struts, pecked and preened among the glittering bed of shattered safety glass. The cockpit was empty. One of the flight seats lay a few meters from the wreck.

He uncapped his canteen and drank, then screwed the cap on again and dialed HQ. He reported the accident to an anonymous functionary who advised him law enforcement would be apprised and rescue personnel dispatched directly. He closed the phone and walked away from the crash site. The crows stayed.

He tracked his own footprints toward the mountains. The pilot’s tinted glasses twinkled where they hung from a sage bush. He stuck the glasses into his shirt pocket and kept moving, hardly bothering to glance down now; instinct dragged him forward. He came to a low rise. The ground was trampled. A long, sloping slab of carved rock dominated. A strange misshapen skull was transfixed on a wooden pole; the skull of an impossibly large ram missing a horn.

Two men stood at either end of the rock. The pilot’s flight suit was torn and grimy. —Give those back. The pilot pointed at the glasses. In the near distance, a column of deadly black storm clouds mounted vertically, its interior shot with brief flares of lightning.

The other man wore a toga open at the chest. His flesh glowed blue-white like the wings of a moth. The man looked at him and said, —Hello, Billy Bob.

He awakened, cross-legged, the bole of a pine digging into his back. Red, evening light filtered through a scrim of clouds. The coyote den remained silent, lifeless. His canteen lay beside him, open so that most of the water had leaked and made a small, mucky depression. He poured what remained over his cracked lips, then spat, stomach recoiling at the acrid taste; bitter grains he couldn’t identify lingered on his tongue. A beam of light illuminated the canteen so that it fractured like a prism and continued along his optic nerve and into the recesses of his brain where something turned over. A crow’s shadow flitted and fluttered, and danced away.

—You crazy bitch, he said, staring at the canteen with mounting horror. This couldn’t be happening. He dropped the canteen, then with bleary resolve, retrieved it and hooked it on his belt. He’d need evidence.

The module glistened red and orange, then winked out, a blown match head, as he walked into the yard. Simon and Garfunkel sang about darkness, their old friend, on the intercom. She was in a far better mood. She hummed while industriously clacking away at the keyboard, occasionally stirring a spoon in her tin cup. He stowed the tranquilizer gun, undressed, then went to the toilet, pushed his fingers down his throat, and retched. He clutched the sides of the toilet and listened to her chuckle in the other room. She sounded like a witch, he thought. Cackling and rubbing her knuckles as she plotted his doom.

He eventually emerged from the stall and took a can of beans from the shelf and cleared a space at the table. He sat, head in his hands, gazing numbly at the can of beans, realizing he’d forgotten the can opener, a plate, or a spoon.

—Want me to fix you something? she said. —You look weak as a kitten.

He licked his lips and smiled until they cracked and bled. —Don’t worry about me. I jogged three kilometers after a coyote. I’m winded, is all.

—Know what my favorite story is? *The Landlady*, by Roald Dahl. Great story. My sister read it to me when we were kids. Scared the shit outta me, but I loved it. It stuck with me. Do you know the story I’m talking about?

—Sounds familiar. He flicked his tongue over his lips, tasting the blood. —I feel as if I should recall because it’s famous. Like Tyson and Holyfield.

—Hee, hee, that’s so funny. You have a hell of a sense of humor, lover boy.

—There’s a dog that doesn’t move. A bird sitting in its cage. He closed his eyes, concentrating. Bitter almonds. The acrid silt at the bottom of his canteen, burning his throat.

—The old lady was into taxidermy. Once you figure that part out, you know what a train wreck is coming. Not one drop of blood is spilled and it’s the creepiest, ickiest story ever. Dahl was the shit.

—Why are you angry? he said. —This is about what happened with us back when, isn’t it? My God, girl, it wasn’t a thing. He had difficulty

enunciating. —Not worth this. Not worth this.

—I've spiked your water for two weeks. O mighty hunter that you are, it's pathetic. I thought it'd be so much harder. I almost feel guilty; it's like strangling a child.

—Not worth this, he said.

—Do you even know what this *is?* Her chair squeaked as she rose, and her bare feet scuffed on the floor as she crossed the space between them. —I wondered where you went all day. You've been doing some heavy thinking at long last, haven't you? But I'm sorry to say, it's too late, motherfucker. Too late for you.

He looked up and saw she was holding the tin cup. She pinched her nostrils between thumb and forefinger, smiled and twitched her wrist, and dashed the contents of the cup into his face. He knew it was muriatic acid from the smell. He blocked with his left arm and twisted partially away, lurching from the chair, but some went into his eye and reality was eclipsed by a sudden blizzard of white.

—Oh, honey, are you okay? she said. —Did you get any on you?

Meanwhile, his eye bubbled into its socket, cooked like an egg white. He punched her with the can in his fist, not aiming, not thinking, because the acid was searing him, eating him alive, flesh and thought alike. The can smashed edgewise into her temple, and the tremor reverberated through his arm as bone gave way. She stepped backward, then sat abruptly in one of the plastic chairs. He threw the can at her, but his remaining vision flickered wildly and he couldn't see whether he struck her or not. His lungs began to burn. Pain was a clothes hanger twisting into his soft gray matter. He shrieked and plowed through tables, chairs, a wooden partition; he tripped and sprawled on his belly. He curled into himself, writhing and retching, and slammed his head against the floor until he lost consciousness. The agony followed him down.

The Sierras team had camped near a hot spring and everyone leaped in naked and shouting. Someone brought booze, someone else a bag of grass, and it was a hell of a party beneath the full moon. After the others had drifted to their tents, drunken and singing, rough-housing and playing grab-ass, he took her on a flat white rock by the light of a dying fire, slick from

the water, steam boiling from them as they clinched. An owl screamed as she screamed and dug her heels into his ribs. Two weeks of smoldering glances and glancing touches had led to this apocalyptic moment.

They took a vacation that began in Kenya and rambled south. He wanted to see the lions. Six weeks of safaris and relentless fucking in every hostel and two-star hotel along the Barbary Coast. She was recently divorced from a fellow geologist who worked in Washington D.C. as the head of a department in a small, but respectable museum. She described her ex-husband as a soft, lovely man. She was on top of him when she said this, hands flat on his chest, nude but for the thick belt she wore on her hiking breeches. The buckle scraped his belly as she fucked him. He wasn't listening. His head hung off the bed and he stared through a set of billowing curtains at the clouds.

He found the puppy, an orphaned mix, in an alley in Denver. He took the pup to the vet for shots and worming. While he stood at the counter, bemused by his impulsiveness, one of his long-lost contacts, a buddy from college days, called with a job offer; a nine-month gig in Alaska. He said yeah, and put the puppy in a box and took it to her apartment. She fell in love, as he expected. He asked to her to watch it for him during the Alaska trip. They had dinner at a French restaurant, stumbled home high on a bottle of Chablis, and made sweet, tearful love while the puppy whined and scratched at the door. The next day she drove him to the airport and told him to write. He didn't write, not once in nine months, didn't speak to her again, and a couple of years later he heard she was dating some guy who snuffed fires on oil rigs. The guy died in one of the fires, but whoever told him didn't know what she was doing or where she lived.

Sometimes, especially when he was very drunk, he'd awaken and smell her scent on the pillow. He'd think about her and the dog. Eventually, he didn't.

She was still sitting in the chair when he regained his senses. Her head lolled and her legs splayed crudely, the way men often sat, crotches exposed. She'd pissed herself. A fly preened on her thigh.

The module was full of red shadows, or his head was full of red shadows. His left eye was gone, a crater leaking gelatin. He felt it sliding around. His forearm and hand were blistered; they resembled microwaved hamburger.

The flesh of his cheek seemed to be sloughing, and when he touched his head, a hank of hair came free. The interior of his mouth was spongy, and his throat felt as if she'd dragged a rusty fork down his esophagus and then stabbed his lungs repeatedly. Pain broke over him in waves and when he coughed, blood and mucus shot forth. He gibbered and rocked with his head in his hands until finally he regained enough sense to find the first aid kit and take a half bottle of aspirin and a shot of morphine. Through it all, she watched him, one eye slightly higher than the other, the corner of her mouth downturned. He went to the radio, afraid to turn his back on her, but there wasn't much choice.

He keyed the mike and made the call. The answer, when it finally came, surfaced from dead static. The voice was garbled, made unintelligible by the white noise and gain distortion. It responded to his cries for help with bursts of vaguely menacing gobbledygook until a red light on the radio's console blinked and the machine shut down and went cold. His cell phone couldn't locate a signal. He slumped in the corner, gnawing his wrist bloody to quiet the ravening fire consuming his brain. He heard himself whimper and was vaguely ashamed and horrified at how abruptly a man could be reduced to an animal.

Sometime later the power died and the interior of the module went dark. Moonlight trickled in and illuminated her face. Had her neck twisted slightly so she might focus upon him with her glistening eyes? Had her hand shifted position? He summoned the courage to stir from his niche and crawl like a wounded beast to the next compartment. He locked the door and wedged a mop from the supply locker under the handle and propped himself against the wall.

He'd dozed for several minutes when the noises began in the main area. It was a stealthy sound, the scrape and scuffle of feet navigating wrecked furniture. The relentless throbbing in his eye dulled his senses, rendered him effectively inert as he listened to the floor squeak closer, ever closer. Why hadn't he grabbed the gun? Or his work belt with the big hunting knife? A thick, scummy layer of foam had curdled in a ring around his mouth. He scratched it, bit down hard on his fingers, trying in vain to shock himself into action. How many times had he watched a coyote or a cougar in a leg-hold trap, dying by inches until it caved in and lay there, impassive

and docile, awaiting the end? It was too dim for him to see the door handle jiggle, but he heard it clearly enough and thought maybe this was his turn to skip from the face of the Earth.

—Honey, unlock the door.

He gibbered and chewed his fingers. It wasn't her voice and he didn't know how to assess that fact beyond the terror of the situation. The voice was soft and guttural, sexless and abominable in its alien timbre. The voice emanated pure malice, and it wanted him. Oh yes, it wanted him.

—Open the door. We can help you.

We, it said. What the fuck was *we?* Where had he heard that? From what trash book, from what horror flick? The Bible, the Old Testament. Almighty God had occasionally referred to Himself in the plural. Demons, too. But it wasn't an angel or a devil on the other side of the door. No way, and he nodded his head to reinforce the assertion. There was a fucking cultist standing there. He'd been correct to suspect one or more of those creeps lurked in the brush, spying and plotting, poised for the moment he could move in for the kill. Either that or his sweet ex-girlfriend could alter her voice, or her ability to form words was severely impaired from her fractured skull.

—Let us in. You aren't well. We can smell you. You're burned. Your flesh is suppurating. It's rotting. It's falling from the bone.

He covered his good eye, trying to make his pain and fear subside, the voice to leave him in peace. He was caught in his own kind of leg-hold trap, except he couldn't chew his leg off to escape.

—Come, open up. Let us help.

—Go to hell! he said, first in a mumble, then a hoarse shout. —Get the fuck away! He repeated this until his voice cracked to pieces and the only sound he could make was a dry, pathetic whine.

—Help me, she said. Not the guttural voice, but hers. She sounded afraid.

He wept.

Pale light filtered through the window. His cheek was pressed against the floor, gummed to the surface by its own juices. Light pooled around his limp hand. The skin was scorched and ruined and a dark scab covered his

knuckles. The tendons had tightened like violin strings and he couldn’t make a fist.

He peeled himself free, unlocked the door and surveyed his world. Deranged chimpanzees had redecorated the interior. Every bit of equipment was smashed. Dust leaked through a gash in the hull. The hatch was missing, in its place a ragged hole. She was gone too.

A bomb had detonated in the yard. Canned goods, wiring, bits of wood and silverware and crushed glass twinkled in the dirt. The hatch lay nearby, twisted and deformed. He wanted to call for her, but his throat was stripped. The air was hot and sickeningly bright. His good eye didn’t seem reliable. Everything shimmered like a photograph negative. Everything glowed white or oozed darkness. There was no telling the time; the face of his watch was blank. He scrabbled about the yard, tears and pus rolling down his cheek.

He wrapped a sliver of glass in cotton and went forth on hands and knees with his nose to the earth like a dog. Her trail started at the edge of camp. It was easy to follow the broken twigs, the gore-splattered needles and leaves, and though it wound serpentine through brush and trees, he quickly guessed the destination. She’d been dragged by her hair, like a carcass.

It was a long, bloody crawl to the den.

He lay on his side, panting, fixated on her sandal. The sandal was caked in black grime and wedged between split halves of a stone. He’d seen the other shoe a ways back, dangling from a bush. The sun fell below the jagged rim of the mountains. Heat rapidly dissipated, sucked into the advancing red shadows. He mumbled and whined to himself, incoherent except for flashes of insight that urged him to slice his throat and be done, and he would’ve committed the act, except when the moment came, he realized he’d dropped the improvised blade, that it was lost. And so all was lost. The moon crept up from its lair and grinned its devil grin. She cried out, muffled and faint. Or a coyote yipped over the ridge. He trembled from head to toe, galvanized to pitiful life by the image of her screaming, buried alive.

He coughed and pulled himself, hand over hand, among the roots, smelling her blood mixed with the cool dust, husked leaves and dead needles. The

entrance was narrow, but he forced his head through, then his shoulders. He wriggled like a snake and his flesh scraped raw, and his hips were past the threshold and he coiled in the rank, decaying warmth of the den. The mountain breeze tickled the soles of his feet in a lingering caress, then he squirmed fully inside.

For an eon he floated in perfect darkness, listening to insects burrowing through wood and bark. He wasn't surprised when something larger stirred. A cold, hard hand touched his cheek and clamped his mouth, stifling any sobs, or shrieks of terror or joyous exclamation. He relaxed, too weak for the struggle. He was home.

Her tongue went into his ear like the worm into the apple.

A coyote sneaked from the trees and crouched near the ancient den, the forbidden ground, sniffing at the fresh furrows in the earth, at the blood and the piss and the acrid stench of fear musk. The coyote had roved far from its normal haunts tonight. It was very young and didn't understand why none of the packs lived here, why the only scents were the scents of sickness and death.

The animal's ears pricked forward, and it froze, head cocked toward the mound. A cloud rippled across the face of the moon, and when it passed, the coyote bolted, racing from shadow to shadow, and vanished into the silvery gloom. Farther off, the pack howled, their cries echoing along hidden canyons in a damned chorus.

Mysterium Tremendum

This version taken from *Occultation and Other Stories*, 2010
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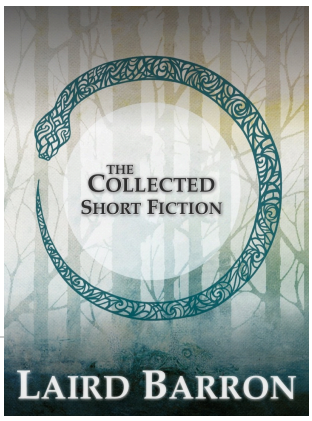
Minor changes were made for the reprint in *New Cthulhu 2* version



1

We bought supplies for our road trip at an obscure general goods store in Seattle—a multi-generational emporium where you could purchase anything from space-age tents to snowshoes once worn by Antarctic explorers. That's where we came across the guidebook.

Glenn found it on a low shelf in the rear of the shop, wedged between antique souvenir license plates and an out of print *Jenkins' Field Guide to Birds of Puget Sound.* Fate is a strange and wondrous force—the aisles were dim and narrow and a large, elderly couple in muumuus was browsing the very shelf and it was time for us to go, but as I opened my mouth to suggest we head for the bar down the street, one of them, the man I think, bumped a rack of postcards and several items splatted on the floor. The man didn't glance back as he walked away.

Glenn despised that sort of rudeness, although he contented himself to mutter and replace the fallen cards. So we poked at the shelves and there *it* was. He brushed off the cover, gave it a look, then passed it around to Victor, Dane, and myself. The book shone in the dusty gloom of that aisle, and it radiated an aura of antiquity and otherworldliness, like a blackened bone unearthed from the Burgess Shale. The book was pocket-sized and bound in dark leather. An embossment of a broken red ring was the only cover art. Its interior pages were of thin, brown paper crammed with articles and essays and route directions typed in a small, blurry font that gave you a migraine if you stared at it too long. The table of contents divided Washington State into regions and documented, in exhaustive detail, areas of interest to the prospective tourist. A series of appendices provided illustrations and reproductions of hand-drawn maps. The original copyright

was 1909, and this seventh edition had been printed in 1986. On the title page: attributed to *Divers Hands* and no publisher; entitled *Moderor de Caliginis.*

"Moderor de Caliginis!" Victor said in a flawless imitation of Bruce Campbell in *Army of Darkness*. He punctuated each syllable with a stabbing flourish—a magician conjuring a rabbit, or vanishing his nubile assistant. Dane tilted his head so his temple touched Victor's. "But what does it mean?" he said in the stentorian tone of a 1950s broadcaster reporting a saucer landing. He'd done a bit of radio in college. "I flunked Latin," Glenn said, running his thumb across the book's spine. His expression was peculiar.

The proprietor didn't know anything either. He pawed through a stack of manifests without locating an entry or price for the book. He sold it to Glenn for five dollars. We took it home (along with two of the fancy tents) and I stuck it in the top drawer of my nightstand. Those crinkly, musty pages, their water stains and blemishes, fascinated me. The book smelled as if it had been fished from a stagnant well and left to dry on a rock. Its ambiguous pedigree and nebulous diction hinted at mysteries and wonders. I was the one who translated the title. *Moderor de Caliginis* means *The Black Guide.* Or close enough.

2

I'd lived with Glenn for five years in a hilly Magnolia neighborhood. Our house was a brick two story built in the 1930s and lovingly restored by the previous owner. The street was quiet and crowded by huge, spreading shade trees. There was a sheer stone staircase walkup from the curb and a good-sized yard bordered by a wrought-iron fence and dense shrubbery. Glenn was junior partner at a software development firm that hadn't quite been obliterated by the dot-com implosion. His office was a nook across from the kitchen with a view of the garden and moldering greenhouse. I wrote articles for the culture sections of several newspapers and did freelance appraisals for galleries and estates. Glenn got a kick out of showing my column photo around—I wore my hair shaggy, with thick sideburns and a thicker mustache, and everybody thought I looked like a 1970s pimp or an

undercover vice cop. I moonlighted as an instructor at a dojo in the University District. We taught little old ladies to poke muggers and rapists in the eyes with car keys and hat pins. Good times.

Dane and Victor flew in from Denver for the long-planned and plotted sojourn through the hills and dales of our fair state. The plan included them spending a week or so doing the tourist bit in town before we lit out into the wilds. I knew the fellows through Glenn who'd attended college with them. Dane managed telecommunications and advertising for the Denver Broncos. A rugged blond with a flattened nose and cauliflower ears from amateur boxing matches and tavern brawls. His partner Victor was stocky and bald and decidedly non-violent. He'd inherited a small fortune from his parents and devoted his time to editing an online poetry journal of repute. The journal was once mentioned by then U.S. poet laureate Billy Collins in his weekly column. Victor was a Charles Simic and Mark Strand man and I liked him from the start. Glenn referred to them as Ebony and Ivory on account of Victor's resemblance to a young Stevie Wonder and Dane's being as white as a bar of soap.

We threw a party and invited a few friends from Glenn's company and some writer and photographer colleagues of mine. Glenn barbequed steak on the back porch. I mixed a bunch of margaritas in pitchers and after dinner we sat around drinking as the sky darkened and the stars came out.

The big news was Dane and Victor had gotten hitched in California before Proposition Eight overturned the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. This was a year and a half gone by, so their visit was part vacation and part honeymoon. I confess to a flash of jealousy at the matching rings, the wallet of sepia tone wedding photos and the sea of family and friends in those photos. The permanence of their relationship galled me and I loathed myself for it. Glenn hadn't proposed and I was too stubborn, too afraid of rejection to propose to *him*. I slipped away while everybody was laughing about the wedding hijinks.

Glenn sauntered in as I was rinsing the dishes and put his arm around me and kissed my cheek. He was tall and lanky and had to lean over to do it. I'd drunk four or five margaritas in the meantime and my eyes were watery and doubtless red. He was oblivious, not that I held it against him. Glenn could be tender and thoughtful and wasn't so much indifferent as clueless.

Despite his interest in classical music, literature and art, and a possibly less wholesome, but no less cerebral, fascination with the esoteric and the occult, he didn't like to think very deeply about certain things. His father was dead; a career railroad man, second generation Irish, he dropped in his tracks from a heart attack when Glenn was fifteen. Glenn's parents had known he was gay since grade school and they accepted him. Everything came easy. He cheerfully took what we had for granted as he took everything else for granted. The guy read books and worked with strings of code, for Christ's sake. Truly a miracle he possessed any social graces whatsoever.

As for me, my father had been a white boy from the Bronx who served thirty years in the Army, the last decade of it as a colonel. My mother was a former Brazilian teen-queen bathing beauty who married Dad to get the hell out of her hometown. Dad passed away in his sleep from an overdose of pills a few weeks before I met Glenn. I sometimes wondered if it'd been accidental, or closer to the protagonist's opt-out in that famous little novel by Graham Greene. Mom pretended I'd court a fine young lady one day soon and sire a brood of kids. My three brothers were scattered across the world. The eldest kept in touch from India. Otherwise, I received birthday cards, the odd phone call or email, and that was that. Glenn kissed me again—hard and on the mouth, and he tasted sweetly of booze. I wiped my eyes and grinned and let it ago like I always did.

Gnats and mosquitoes descended. The guests retreated to the living room. Glenn put on music and began serving another round of drinks from the wet bar. I fetched *Moderor de Caliginis* and took it to my office. An examination of the book revealed phone numbers and mailing addresses amidst the other text, although considering the edition's publishing date, I assumed most were dead ends. In tiny print on the copyright page was a line that read SUBMISSIONS with a P.O. Box address in Walla Walla.

Meanwhile, the party was in full gear. Between songs, raucous laughter floated to me. My CDs—Glenn preferred classical music; Beethoven, Chopin, Gershwin, Sibelius. That wouldn't do at our casual get-togethers. Somebody sang along to the choruses of Neil Sedaka, Miles Davis, and Linda Ronstadt, a step behind and off-key. Daulton, our grizzled tomcat,

jumped onto the easy chair near my desk and went to sleep. Old Daulton was a comforting soul.

I hunched over my computer monitor and ran searches of key phrases from the book. A guy in Germany claimed there were numerous versions of the *Black Guide*—he'd acquired editions for regions in France, Spain, Portugal, and South Africa. A college student in Pullman wrote of a friend of a friend who'd used the book to explore caves in Yakima. That struck me as odd—I wasn't familiar with any notable caves in Washington. Another man, an anthropologist named Berman, explained that several of the entries provided contact information for practitioners of the occult. During the late 1990s he'd visited some of these persons and joined them in séances, divinations, and fertility rituals. He was currently a professor at Central Washington University. On a lark, I sent him an email, noting I'd inherited a copy of the guide.

The most interesting item I retrieved during my three lonely hours at the keyboard was the journal of an individual from Ellensburg who went by the handle of Rose. Rose started her journal in April 2007. There were three entries—the first talked about not really wanting a journal at all, but keeping one on the advice of her therapist. The second was a twenty-five-hundred-word essay on her travels abroad and eventually finding the *Black Guide* at a gift shop in Ellensburg. Apparently Rose had sought the book for several years and was elated. The guide contained a listing of secret attractions, hidden places, and persons "in the know" regarding matters esoteric and arcane. In the final entry, she mentioned packing for a trip with three friends to the "tomb" on the Olympic Peninsula and would make a full report upon her return. The journal hadn't been updated since June 2007. Nonetheless, I left an anonymous message inquiring after her status. This satisfied me in a perverse way—it felt as if I'd thrown her a lifeline.

I signed off around three a.m. Glenn was already in bed and snoring. I lay beside him and stared at the pale reflection of streetlights on the ceiling. Who was Rose? Young, pretty, wounded. Or, maybe not. The kind of girl who took pictures of herself in period costumes. Pale, thick mascara, in her rhinestone purse a deck of tarot cards she'd inherited from an older woman, a long lost sweetheart. Rose was a girl with many friends and lovers, yet who was usually alone. I pressed the *Black Guide* against the breast of my

pajamas and wondered where she was at that moment. I dreamed of her that night, but in the morning all I remembered was flying above an endless forest and the rocky bluff of a small mountain, and into a cave that swallowed me whole.

3

"C'mon. Tell Willem a Tommy story." Glenn wore a loopy smirk. He'd done one too many shots of Cuervo. "Oh, yes!" Victor pounded his empty glass on the table. "Okay, okay. Here's one about Thomas-san," Dane said. His hair was tousled, his cheeks were flushed. He eyed me with an intensity that indicated such a story symbolized a great confidence, that I was on the verge of admittance to the inner circle.

This was in the early evening after hiking up and down Queen Anne Hill since breakfast, peeking into shops, trying the innumerable bistros and pubs on for size, and yelling raucous comments at the construction boys ripping apart the sidewalk in front of the Phoenician Theatre. Now we were just off campus at a corner booth in a dimly lighted hole-in-the-wall called The Angry Norseman. We'd drunk with the vigor of sailors on shore leave the entire day and were almost sober again. A gaggle of college students in University of Washington sweatshirts congregated at the bar and overflowed the tables. It was getting rowdy.

"Who the hell is Tommy?" I said.

"A short, stubby guy who took six years to graduate," Glenn said. "Older than us. Balding, but he had this Michael Bolton thing going on. Hair down to his bum. Managed a pizza parlor."

"Mean sonofabitch," Dane said. "He'd get drunked up and pick fights with the frat boys. One of 'em whacked him in the head with a golf club. Just pissed him off."

"I remember that." Glenn chuckled, and licked the salt from his wrist. He downed his tequila. His eyes were bright. "Cops locked him in the tank overnight and slapped him with disorderly conduct."

"A real loveable asshole," Dane said. Glenn said, "He got killed waterskiing a couple years ago. First time out, too. Strapped on a pair of

skis and got his neck broken fifteen minutes later. Tried to jump a ramp. Dunno who the hell was driving. All their fault, y'know."

"Holy shit," I said. Glenn patted my hand and shrugged. "Whole thing was moronic. Sorta fit, though. He was gonna go out from a rotten liver, a motorcycle accident, or a prison fight. That's just how it was with the crazy fool."

"Wait, that's—" Victor closed his mouth. Dane said, "Anyway. This isn't really a Tommy story per se. We had this other buddy named Max. Ol' Maximus was a real cocksman and he was cozy with this little rich girl who was going to an all-girl school on the other end of town. A real honey."

"Hear, hear," Glenn raised his glass. "Glittery green eye-shadow, Catholic schoolgirl skirts and thigh-high lace-up boots. Ruff!"

"Right, right. Becky Rimmer."

"You're kidding," I said.

"Her name *was* Rimmer. Kinda unfortunate. Her folks were out of town and she invited Max over for the weekend, and me, Glenn, Tommy and Vicky latched on. Becky didn't like it much, but what the hell was she gonna do? So we arrive at the house—and man, it's posh. A gaming room with a kickass sound system and a stocked bar. We were in seventh heaven. She laid down the ground rules—be careful with the new pool table and hands off Daddy's scotch. No problem! Max promised."

"Becky disappears with Max for some nooky. First thing—Tommy, who's already high as a kite, decides to shoot some pool. He misses the cue ball and digs a three inch groove in the felt."

"And the booze?" I said. Dane pantomimed guzzling from a bottle. "Heh, Thomas had her old man's supply of Dewar's in his guts in short order. Pretty quick, Danny boy gets bored and decides to check on Becky and Max who've locked themselves in Daddy's den and are making like wild animals. Tommy gets some tools from the garage and the next thing we know, he's standing on a stool and drilling a hole in the door to make a peephole. Laughing like a lunatic, sawdust piling on his shoes."

Victor said, "Me and Dane dragged him away from the door and gave him some more booze. Things are going okay until there's a crash from the den

and Max starts hollering. Turns out, he was banging the girl on a glass coffee table and at the height of the rumpy pumpy it shattered and she dropped through. They were going at it doggy-style, so she sliced her arms and knees. Nothing serious, but it looked awful. Blood and jizz everywhere."

"Yeah," Dane said. "A scene from one of Takashi Miike's films. Naturally, we took her to the hospital. The docs gave her some sutures and bandaged her head to toe. Many awkward questions were asked. Max drives her home and the rest of us split. Mom and Dad get back early. Becky's lying in bed trying to think of a story when she hears her mom in the study go, "Oh. My. God. What is this *filth*—?" And, as Mommy dearest comes through the door waving her daughter's soiled undergarments, from downstairs her dad bellows, "WHO THE HELL DRANK MY DEWAR'S?"

I laughed so hard my side ached. "What did she do?"

"Girl was a soap opera junkie. She squinted and said in a pitiful whisper, 'Mommy? Mommy? Is that you?'"

Glenn bought us another round. Conversation turned to the impending trip. Victor unfolded a sheet of paper and showed us notes he'd made in heavy pencil. On the itinerary was a day hike on Mount Vernon, a tour of the Tacoma Museum of Glass, a leisurely day in the state capital of Olympia, then a blank slate. There'd definitely be a night or two camping on the Peninsula; *where* was yet to be settled. Victor said, "That leaves us some days to check out the sights. Maybe visit Port Angeles?"

After much noncommittal mumbling from the three of them, I took the *Black Guide* from my pocket and thumbed through the section on the Olympic Peninsula. "The Lavender Festival in Sequim is coming up. Port Angeles is close by, and Lake Crescent. Glenn and I stayed at the lodge a few years ago. Gorgeous scenery."

"Absolutely," Glenn said. Victor said, "I hear it's spooky. The Lady of the Lake murders…"

"Oh, that was ages ago," I said, albeit it made me uneasy that I'd recently read a passage in the guide documenting the scandalous tale. Too many coincidences were accumulating for my taste. Dane took the guide and turned it toward the dim lamp hanging above our table. He grinned. "Vicky,

look at this!” Victor leaned in and scanned the page. Dane said, “This thing is a kick in the pants. Says there’s a hotel in Centralia where they hold séances once a month. And a… dolmen up a trail on Mystery Mountain.”

“See,” I said, “we should put Sequim on the calendar. Go visit this dolmen after we see how the lavender jelly gets made.”

“What’s that, anyhow?” Dane said. “A prehistoric tomb,” Glenn said. “There aren’t any dolmens in this state. Maybe I’m wrong, but it sounds fishy.” He spent an inordinate amount of time cruising Wikipedia. “Up a trail, eh?”

“About seventeen or eighteen miles up a crappy road, more like. The Kalamov Dolmen and Cavern. There are some campsites. It’s on the edge of a preserve.” Victor stroked his goatee. Dane said, “This is a seriously cool idea. I gotta see it. I gotta.” He poked Victor in the ribs and laughed. “C’mon, baby. This sounds awesome, don’t it?” Victor agreed that it indeed sounded awesome. Glenn promised to arrange for a bed and breakfast in Sequim and to make a few calls regarding the mysterious dolmen. If nothing else, the park seemed as decent a place as any to camp for a night or two. The guide mentioned trout in the mountain streams. I wasn’t much for the sport, but Glenn and Dane had dabbled in fly fishing.

Once I got the guide back, I studied the entry on the Kalamov Dolmen and its attendant notes in the appendix, which included references to celestial phases and *occultation rites.* I didn’t know what any of that stuff meant. Nonetheless, we’d have lively anecdotes for future vacation slide shows and a story to tell, I was certain.

4

Glenn and I frequently made love the first year we were together. Not so much later. We were perpetually exhausted because of project deadlines, hostile takeovers at the workplace and, of late, the ever-shrinking newspaper circulation. Glenn had climbed the ladder by dint of overtime and weekends; I still received more commissions than I could shake a stick at. Familiarity took its toll as well.

Once Dane and Victor arrived, Glenn tried to fuck me every night. That hurt my feelings. I knew he was jealous of Victor—Victor was a flirt and he

came on to me in a not too serious way. Glenn laughed it off; however, when the lights dimmed… He was also a territorial sonofabitch and it aroused him that they were screwing like rabbits down the hall. I tried not to let it bother me too much, although I drew the line at him groping me while dead drunk. That night, after we piled into a cab and finally made it home from The Angry Norseman, I smacked his hands away as he kept grabbing at my zipper. He persisted. I lurched downstairs and crashed on the couch, a maneuver I hadn't resorted to since our last real argument the year prior.

There was a special on the History Channel. A crack team of geologists and a film crew were mucking about Spain, exploring caverns and whatnot. My eyelids drooped. I slowly emerged from a doze to hear a man discussing holy rites among the Klallam tribes and other ancient peoples of the Pacific Northwest. He described burial mounds along the Klallam River and the locations of megaliths and dolmens throughout Western Washington. I was confused, second-guessing Glenn's assertions that no ancient megaliths or dolmens existed in our state, but the narrator continued: *Of particular interest is the Kalamov Cavern site near Mystery Mountain National Park. The Kalamov Dolmen, named after Dr. Boris Kalamov, who discovered it in 1849, is remarkable in its size and antiquity. A relic of the Neolithic Age… three thousand B.C. Perhaps older. A word of caution is in order. There is a dangerous.…* The monologue faded and someone wailed in pain.

I lifted my head and the room was full of blue, unfocused light. The television screen skipped, and ghostly figures shifted between bars of static. Soundless because I'd hit the mute button prior to nodding off. Every channel was full of snow and shadow, except for the ones with the black bar saying NO SIGNAL. Unsettled without knowing precisely why, I rubbed my eyes and went to the window. The neighborhood was blanketed in darkness but for a scattering of porch lights. The cityscape was hidden by the canopy of the trees. I hugged myself against an inexplicable chill as I attempted to recall the odd commentary of the dream.

Turning, I saw a man sitting in the armchair in the corner near the pine shelf that housed a meager selection of my books. A burst of light from the TV screen revealed this wasn't Glenn or our guests. I was woozily drunk—the topknot, the surly, piggish features, the short, bulky frame, was

precisely how I'd envisioned the inimitable Tommy of college lore. He reclined mostly concealed in shadow, but I saw he was naked, one thick leg folded across the other to artfully cover his manhood. His flesh was very pale; the flesh of a creature who'd dwelt in a sunless grotto for ages. He raised a finger to his lips. "I've just come to talk," he said, imparting menace with the over-enunciation of each syllable, hinting that on any other day I'd experience something other than conversation. "Scream, and our buddy Glenn is going to come running. He'll trip over Vicky's jacket on the top step and roll down the stairs. It'll be a mess, trust me."

I wiped drool from the corner of my mouth. The horrible vision of Glenn falling, shattering his spine, kept me from yelling. I said, "You're him."

"Call me Tom."

"Tom. Can't be."

"Didn't say I *was* Tom. I said, *call* me Tom. Got any hooch? That's a rhetorical question, by the way."

I shuffled to the kitchen and immediately noticed the cellar door ajar by several inches. The way down was via a narrow wooden staircase missing its railing. The cellar itself was small and cramped and mildewed and we never used it. I took a bottle of Stoli from the cupboard. I poured two tall water glasses a finger below the rims and carried them to the living room. In the back of my mind I'd hoped this would break the spell, that I'd snap out of this somnambulant state and find the visitor had evaporated. He hadn't. Tom accepted the glass and drank half of it in one long gulp. I sat on the couch, elbows on my knees, clasping my own drink with both shaky hands. "Why you? I don't get it. Why you and not my granny? Or my dad?" He shrugged. I said, "It's because of that story tonight."

"Real double-breasted asshole, wasn't I?" he said, and laughed. "Your granny and your old man don't have anything to say to you, I guess. You're making assumptions about where I come from, anyway. This ain't like that. See wings on me? Horns?"

"Maybe *An American Werewolf in London* made a bigger impression on me than I thought. Next time we meet, your face will be a melted pizza."

"Loved that fucking movie. Damn, that nurse was hot. For months I got a boner every time I heard a shower running."

“She didn’t do much for me.”

“I suppose not.”

“What’s going on here?”

“I could use a smog. Drinking and smoking go hand and hand. My old man was Black Irish. Like Glenn’s. We Black Irish smoke and drink and beat our wives.” Tommy laughed, grating and nasty.

“Glenn quit,” I said. “I don’t smoke, either. Sorry.” Tom stared at me through the dark. His eyes glistened in the blue radiance of the TV, brightening, dimming, disappearing with each flicker of the screen. There was a hateful weight in that stare. “Dane smokes,” he said. “So, go ask *him* for a *smog*,” I said. He laughed again. “You wouldn’t like what happens.”

I had another vision, a confused, menacing premonition that sickened me even though I couldn’t see anything but weird, jerky movement in the shadows, and a smash close-up of Dane’s eyes growing too wide. I walked into the kitchen and rummaged in a drawer until I found a pack of Kools that had been squished under the silverware tray since forever. I lighted a cigarette on the burner, returned to Tom and handed it over. He said, “Tastes shitty like a cigarette should.” I had set my glass on the arm of the couch. I drank the rest of the vodka while Tom smoked. A sulfurous stench filled the room. “You play with Ouija boards when you was a kid, Willem?” I nodded. “Sure, in high school. I bought one—Parker Brothers.”

“Hell, all you need is a piece of construction paper and a glass. They work. Ouija boards. Other things too. Like that book you’ve been dicking with. It completes a circuit.” I snapped my fingers. “I knew it. The book.”

“Right on, Ace. The book. *The Black Guide.* You been fucking around with it, haven’t you?”

“If by fucking around with it, you mean reading it, then yeah. I have.”

“C’mon, those drawings in the back—you didn’t copy some of them? Maybe scribbled a few of those weird doodads that look like hieroglyphics onto scratch paper. Tried to sound out some of those gobbledygook Latin phrases. You’re a nerd. Course you did.”

He was right. I’d copied a diagram of a solar eclipse and its related alchemical symbols into my moleskin journal with the heavy enamel pen

my younger brother bought me back when we were still talking. I'd also made dozens of curlicue doodles of the broken circle on the cover. There was something ominously compelling about that ring—it struck a chord on what I could only describe as an atavistic level. It spoke to my inner hominid and the hominid screeched and capered its distress. "What if I did? Did I do something wrong?" My voice was flat and metallic in my ears. I sounded strident and absurd. He said, "Remember the Golden Rules. Action equals reaction. The Crack that runs through everything stares into you. Big fish eats little fish. Night's agents watch you, ape."

"Yeah? Why are you here? Why are you warning me and not your chums. Their idea to use the book for sightseeing, not mine."

"I'm not here to warn anybody. I'm here to give you a good ol' mindfucking, among other things. Think you found the book by accident? There are no accidents around here. Time is a ring. Everything and everyone gets squished under the wheel."

"I don't understand."

"Then you, my friend, are an idiot. And friend, keep going the way you're going and maybe a friend will slice your heart from your chest and take a bite out of it like a Washington's Best in the name of The First Power. That's how friends are."

"This is an *idiotic* imaginary conversation," I said. There wasn't anything imaginary, however, about the searing alcohol in my burps, or the fact my head was wobbling, nor the flutter-flutter of my heart. "Shoo, fly, shoo."

Tom didn't answer. The cherry of his cigarette dulled and blackened. A split second before his shape merged with the darkness, it changed. The room became cold. A woman said, *There are frightful things.* I couldn't tell where the whisper originated. I finally gathered the courage to switch on the lamp and I was alone.

Sleep was impossible. I made a cup of coffee and crept into my office and ran a search on the Kalamov Cavern, the Kalamov Dolmen, and Dr. Kalamov himself. There wasn't a record of a dolmen of any kind in Washington. Boris Kalamov turned out to be no doctor at all, but a rather smarmy eighteenth-century charlatan who faked his academic credentials in order to bolster extraordinary claims made in his series of faux scholarly

books regarding naturalism and the occult. The good doctor's fraudulent escapades came to a sad end thanks to French justice—he was convicted of some cryptic act of pagan barbarism and confined to a Parisian asylum for the remainder of his years. As to whether any of Dr. Kalamov's treatises mentioned a cavern or dolmen on the Olympic Peninsula, I'd likely never know as all were long out of print. However, Mystery Mountain National Park was indeed where the *Black Guide* indicated, and open for business until mid October.

Glenn scrambled eggs for breakfast. He didn't comment on my absence from bed. I spent enough late nights at the computer he scarcely noticed anymore. He was hung over—all of us were. Pale sunlight streamed through the window and illuminated our chalky faces as we sat at the kitchen table and sipped orange juice and picked at scrambled eggs. The whiteness of Glenn's cheeks, the raccoon-dark circles of his blank eyes, startled me. My own hands shone, for a moment, gnarled, and black-veined, as if from tremendous age. I gulped a whole glass of juice, coughing a bit, and when I looked again I saw it was only an illusion. I'd seen it before, watching Glenn sleep with the light illuminating him in such a way that his future self, the wrinkled senior citizen, was forecast.

5

Glenn's Land Rover was a rattletrap, sky-blue hulk. He'd driven the rig exactly four times since purchasing it at an estate sale in Wenatchee some years prior. Normally, we tooled around in his Saab or rode the bus. The Land Rover had bench seats wide enough to host a football team, a huge cargo bed, and smelled of mold, rust, and cigarette smoke. "Hurray," Victor said when Glenn backed it out of the garage. "Let's get this safari started!"

September was unseasonably warm. The Land Rover lacked modern amenities including a CD player and air conditioning. I sat in back with the window rolled down. Everybody wore off-the-rack Hawaiian shirts (a gag dreamed up by Dane) and sunglasses—designer shades for my companions; for me, a cheapo set I'd gotten at an airport gift shop. I also strapped on a pair of steel-toed boots as I usually did when away from home. One never knew when one might need to stomp a mugger or other nefarious type.

Victor wore a digital camera on a strap around his neck. While drinking one night, he'd confided parlaying his access (through Dane's position) to the Broncos' sideline into almost twenty-five-hundred close-up pictures of the cheerleaders in action. He was toying with the notion of auctioning the album on the underground channels of the internet. I thought there were already plenty of candid cheerleader shots floating around the internet; then what did I know?

The voyage started well—Victor even pronounced a soothsaying to that effect: "Sun and moon augur a favorable and erotically charged escapade!" I said goodbye to the cat—a neighbor would pop in and feed him every day—and locked the doors. The hiking trip to Mount Vernon was a relaxed affair as none of us were hardcore outdoorsmen. We had a picnic in the foothills and returned to the lodge well before dark, where we played pinochle with some other tourists, and drank beer until it was time to turn in for the night. Glenn and I got into bed. He typed on his computer while I labored over *The Essential Victor Hugo*—the Blackmore translation. My problem was less with Hugo than the nagging urge to dig the *Black Guide* from my suitcase and have another go at the procession of peculiar diagrams in the appendices and to attempt to tease more meaning from the enigmatic entries and footnotes.

I'd told Glenn about my encounter with Tom, careful to frame it as a weird dream. Glenn frowned and asked for more details. He was intrigued by the occult, fascinated to learn of the secret lives of the famous artists I studied. His interest in such matters waxed stronger than mine—alas, his patience for wading through baroque texts wasn't equal to the task. Upon listening to the tale of Tom's apparition, he'd muttered, "What does it mean?" He was too calm, obviously throttling a much more visceral reaction. Whether this deeper emotion was one of sympathy for my strange encounter, or worry that my screws were loose, I couldn't tell. And I'd said, "I was drunk. It didn't mean anything," while thinking otherwise. Tom indeed referred to cigarettes as "smogs," a fact I'd been unaware, and thus a detail that lent creepy and disturbing authenticity to the encounter. Dream or not, I hadn't cracked the book for three days. I imagined it burning a hole in the case, a chunk of meteorite throbbing with sinister energy.

The next day we spent a few hours at the Tacoma Museum of Glass, then soldiered on to Olympia for a desultory afternoon of wandering the streets and poking around the cafés and boutiques. While my companions were sipping ice coffees, I stepped into a used bookstore and investigated the regional history and travel sections. I got into a conversation with the clerk on duty, a bored ex-librarian who stirred to life when I showed her the guide. She adjusted her glasses and made ticking noises with her tongue as she flipped pages. “I’ve heard of these. Farmers’ Almanacs for pagans.”

The ex-librarian was tall and thin and wore cat’s-eye glasses with pearly frames. Her hair was black and straight and her hands were bigger than Dane’s. She asked where I’d gotten the book and seemed disappointed that I couldn’t remember the name of the store in Seattle. I asked her what she made of the appendices, directing her to the drawings and arcane symbols. “Well, I’m sure I can’t say.” She shut the book with one hand in the resounding manner they must teach in Librarian School. She smiled obliquely. “Perhaps you should visit one of the individuals listed in *Moderor de Caliginis.* Such a person could doubtless tell you a few things.”

Long shadows lay across the buildings when I rejoined everyone at the sidewalk table. My ice coffee had melted to a cup of slush. I envisioned the ex-librarian’s hair swept in a raven’s wing over her bony shoulder, her simple blouse and Capri pants transformed into an elegant evening dress some vamp in a Hammer film might toss on for a wild night at the castle. Her smile smoldered in my imagination. Clammy and unnerved, I suggested we repair to the hotel and change for dinner.

The Flintlock Hotel (est. 1895) was a brick and plaster building set back from Capitol Boulevard between a floral shop and an antique furniture store. The boulevard was lined with trees, and a mini U.S. flag rustled on every light pole between downtown and the Tumwater Bridge. Glenn had rented the McKinley Quarters. This was on the third floor, overlooking the street; a cozy number with a sitting room, bedroom and two baths. There were all kinds of frontier photographs in frames and the place smelled like roses and Douglas fir. Dane and Victor got the Monroe Suite down the hall. Same décor, same layout, but a view of the alley.

I told Glenn I had a migraine. Concerned, he volunteered to cancel our dinner plans and stay in to watch over me. I was having none of that—what

I needed was a couple of hours rest, then, I'd join him and the boys for drinks and dancing at one of the clubs. He ordered warm milk and aspirin from room service and waited with me like a perfect dear until it arrived. He watched me take the aspirin and drink the milk. He felt my forehead then left with his jacket slung over his shoulder.

I waited five minutes, then dialed the anthropologist at his office. We'd arranged to talk a couple of days beforehand. Dr. Berman answered on the second ring. "Look, this guide. It's special." His voice was rough. I pictured him: alone in the wing of a large, decrepit campus museum, a disheveled academic wearing a tweed jacket and thick glasses, slouched in a chair at a desk cluttered with papers and a skull paperweight. His office was lighted by a single lamp. He was smoking a cigarette, a cheap bottle of whiskey in arm's reach. "Say, any notes in the margins? Pages eighty through one-ten. That'd be the chapters on the Juniper Dunes, Olympia, the Mima mounds…"

"Yeah," I said. "So that was you. I can't read your handwriting."

"Neither can I." His chair creaked in the background. I got the impression he was pouring from his bottle and congratulated myself on being so damned clever. I said, "Why'd you get rid of the book?"

"I didn't. My assistant accidentally put it in a box of materials the department donated to the University of Washington. It was some months before I discovered the mistake. The university had no record of its arrival. If I may ask, where did you find it?" I told him. He said, "Odd. Well, perhaps I could inveigle you to return it to me. To be honest, it might fetch a considerable sum on the collector market. Likely more than I can afford."

"I'm not interested in money. Sure, I'll send it back—after our vacation. Where did *you* come across the book?"

"In the foothills of the Cascades. I was backpacking with friends. They knew of this cabin near an abandoned mine. Supposedly a trapper dwelt there in the 1940s. The place was remarkably intact, albeit vermin-infested. The book lay at the bottom of a rusty footlocker, buried beneath newspaper clippings and magazines. Passing strange. A hiker must've hidden it. I often ponder the scenario that led to such an act." While he talked, I reflected that anthropologists and their ilk came by their reputations as tomb robbers

honestly. He got cagey when I inquired after his experiences with the pagans mentioned in the book. “Ah, all I can say is some farmers here and there cleave to ancient customs. More country folk look to the sun, the moon, and the stars for succor than you might think. The nature spirits and the old gods. They don’t advertise, what with Western culture and Christianity’s persecution of such traditions.” This latter comment struck an unpleasant chord. I said, “The good folk don’t advertise, except in the little black book. You mean cults. Satanists?”

“Those too, I suppose. I don’t know firsthand, but to my knowledge I never met any.”

“My boyfriend tells me Washington State is a hotbed of satanic worship,” I said. “By the way. Have you visited the Kalamov Dolmen?”

“The what?”

“Page, um, seventy-two. The Kalamov Dolmen on Mystery Mountain.”

There was a long pause. “I don’t recall reading that entry. A dolmen? Hard to believe I’d miss something so important. Well, the guide has a peculiar… effect. The font is so tiny.” He hesitated and the bottle and glass clinked again. “This may sound, nutty, but be careful. As I said, I met decent folk on the main. User-generated content has its perils. There exists a certain potential for mischief on behalf of whoever anonymously recommends an attraction or service. Look sharp.”

“Sure, Doc.” We said goodbye, then I blurted, “Oh, wait. I meant to ask—you happen to meet any of the folks who’ve owned the book? There’s a girl in your area… Rose. That’s her online persona.” I gave him the rundown of Rose’s journal entries. “Hmm. Doesn’t ring any bells,” Dr. Berman said. “She found the book in Ellensburg? I taught there for a decade. I wonder if she was one of my students. A striking coincidence if so. Please, keep in touch.” We said goodbye again, for real.

Tree branches scraped the window. A streetlamp illuminated the edges of the leaves. I checked my watch. The good doctor had seemed in a hurry to end the conversation. Maybe he knew more about the anonymous journalist than he admitted. I unzipped my suitcase and lifted *Moderor de Caliginis* in its swaddling cloth from amid my socks and underwear. I unwrapped the guide and set it on the table. “Boy, you do get around,” I said. A shiny black

beetle, easily the size of my thumbnail, crawled from the lumpy pages. It scuttled across the tabletop and fell to the carpet, shriveled in death.

6

I went downstairs to the lounge and started a tab with a double vodka on the rocks. The place was small and half full of patrons, yet full of mirrors, thus it appeared busy. Behind the bar there was a big photograph of three loggers standing in the sawn wedge of a redwood. The trio had short hair and handlebar mustaches. Two of them leaned on double-headed axes. The third logger stood a Swede saw on end so it rested against his shoulder. The men wore dirty long johns and suspenders. I finished my drink and the bartender set me up with another without my asking.

A guy in a cream-colored suit sweated on the crescent dais under blue and gold lights, and crooned a Marty Robbins ballad about the life of a twentieth-century drifter. I loved Marty Robbins, but I always hated that song. “Hey there, stud.” Victor squeezed my arm as he slid in next to me. He wore a cardigan that smelled of smoke and aftershave. The bartender brought him something pink with an umbrella floating in the middle.

“Where are the other Musketeers?” I said. Victor toyed with the umbrella. “Athos and Porthos are flirting with a bevy of cute tourista chicks at the Brotherhood Tavern down the street. Totally yanking the poor girls’ chains. Too hilarious for me. I bailed.” I laughed. “How cute are they?” He shrugged, sipped his drink and smiled back. “Not at all, really. Dane’s hammered. I told him if he gets drunk and obnoxious I’m Audi 5000. Let Glenn drag his worthless carcass back to the hotel.” I said, “Hear, hear,” and drained my vodka. I crunched the ice and watched the door. The lobby was dim and the doorway hung in space, a black rectangle.

The singer finished his set with “Cool Water” and “Big Iron.” He made his way from the dais and slumped farther down the bar. His toupee was bad and he’d pancaked his makeup far too heavily. His face seemed familiar, but I couldn’t place it. Victor asked the bartender to put his drinks on our bill. The singer raised his glass and grinned at us and I saw that his dentures were as cheap and awful as everything else. “Poor bastard,” I said, and went to work on my third double. I still smelled the acrid odor of the Kools I’d

given the phantom visitor of a few nights prior. The memory of the scent made me ill. It also made me crave a cigarette. “I’ve got an odd question.”

“Ya, okay. Shoot.”

“That friend of yours who passed away. Tom. He into anything, I dunno, for want of a better term—weird? Such as fortune telling, magic… anything of that nature?”

Victor gave me a long, wondering look. He shook his head and laughed. “Oh, hells yeah. Didn’t Glenn ever tell you? Man, we all got into that shit. Tarot cards, mainly. But, I really dug cultural anthropology. Those dudes get into spooky situations. And the poets of yore. Keats and company. Can’t read the classical poets without coming across funky ideas. Anyhow, the whole point of college is to experiment. Did I ever!”

“Anything heavy?”

“Like black magic? Voodoo? We joked around, but no, nothing heavy. Tommy boy was extra flakey. Dane and I tried astral projection with him and this Deadhead girl. Lawanda. Tommy kept cutting up until we quit and Dane went and scored some weed to keep him quiet. What about you? Are you a true believer?”

“I’m a theorist. Thing is, I’ve been studying that guide book we got in Seattle.”

“I seen that, girlfriend. A hoax, I’m sure. I bet you anything it’s a novelty gag. Somebody printed a couple dozen of them, like pamphlets, and scattered them to the winds.” I considered enumerating the reasons his theory didn’t hold water. The book materials were too expensive to suggest a joke, its articles and essays were too complex. I refrained because my tongue was getting thick from the booze and also because I wanted him to be correct. He said, “What’s Tommy got to do with the book?”

“Not a damned thing. Popped into my head for some reason. You didn’t care for Tom much, huh?”

“He was cruel to me. Dane and Glenn were his boys. None of us called him Tom, by the way. In fact, saying it aloud gives me chills. His father called him Tom. Used to beat his ass, or something. Dude was touchy about that. He’s in my dreams a lot since the accident.”

“That’s understandable. You should get some grief counseling if you haven’t.” Victor rubbed his bald head and gave me another look. “But I didn’t like him.” I said, “Doesn’t matter. He’s part of your life. In those dreams—what’s he want?”

“He doesn’t want anything. He moves in the background like a ghost. That makes total sense, though. The irony! I’m at a party with Dane. The party’s in a posh Malibu house, one of those places that hangs over a cliff, and the host is my second grade teacher, except he’s actually a cinematographer, or a screenwriter named Rick or Dick. He’s got a star on the boulevard. I mingle with all sorts of people I’ve known. Weird combinations of grade school classmates and high school sweethearts, janitors, the chick who used to pour coffee at an all-night diner on the corner, a guy who dealt weed from the back of his El Camino when I lived in North Portland, some hookers who hung out near my friend’s apartment, and famous dead people—Ginsberg and Kerouac; Johnny Cash and Natalie Wood. Lee Van fucking Cleef. Then I’ll spot Tommy in a corner or on the deck, maybe lurking behind some bushes. Sometimes he’s watching me and I’ll try to go talk with him. He disappears before I get there.” Victor’s diamond ring sparked like fire.

I knew he was lying because of how he leaned away from me. Not wholesale lying; some of it was true. The ice had disappeared. I signaled for another drink. My lips were numb; always a bad sign. My forehead was cold and that meant I was afraid. I thought about Tom and the beetle and the pentagram in Appendix B of *Moderor de Caliginis.* I thought about the rough pentagram I’d carved into my desk with a penknife. I’d done it without thinking and covered it with the keyboard afterward, ashamed. This double shot didn’t last long either.

“How’d he die? Really.”

“Waterskiing.”

“Come on, man.”

Victor glanced toward the door before signaling the bartender. “I need another one.” He waited until a fresh drink was in hand to continue. “Look, I wanted to let you in on this the other night. We invented the waterskiing story. *Dane* invented the story. I think he and Glenn have convinced

themselves that's what actually happened. Ah, Dane's gonna wring my neck. We agreed to let it be. Tommy fell into a sinkhole. We'd camped in the hills—a couple of miles from here, in fact—and were hiking some trail. A lot of it blurs, you know? Traumatic stress syndrome, or whatever. One minute Tommy was behind me, the next he was gone. The hole wasn't much. I doubt he ever even saw it. Rescue teams came the next day, but the thing was too deep and too unstable. The proverbial bottomless pit. They didn't recover the body. I admit, me and Dane and Glenn freaked. After we finally got our shit together, we didn't talk about it at all. First time somebody asked, Dane smiled and told them the skiing whopper. Couldn't believe my ears. I didn't argue, though. I went along with it. Except, when Glenn was telling you… frankly, that shocked the hell out of me. You two are serious. You're serious, aren't you?"

"That's the most horrible thing I've ever heard," I said. Victor nodded. "Pretty awful. Thomas didn't suffer, at least. Poor bastard."

"You didn't see him fall?" I don't know why it occurred to me to ask. "He fell. No other explanation. I doubt the guy slipped into the bushes and faked his own death. Living in Maui under an assumed name… nah."

"I'm kinda puzzled why you guys still want to go camping after an experience like that. Me, I'd burn my hiking boots and backpack in a nice bonfire."

"Don't be silly. We've gone camping a half-dozen times at least. Honestly, I see it your way. Dane and Glenn—those two are macho, macho, macho. What happened to Tommy just made them more bullheaded and foolhardy. Dane wants to go tramping the Indonesian backwoods next year, or the year after. Please, God, no. Snakes, spiders, diseases. I might take a pass."

"Uh-huh, and he'll wind up hitting on some eighteen-year-old stud-muffin islander and blame it on the booze and loneliness."

"Ha, yeah. He'd actually blame it on me, if he cheated. Which he wouldn't. He's well aware I carry a switchblade."

"You carry a switchblade?"

"In my sock. Not that I'd use it. I'm too pretty to fight. Although, if D. decided to fuck around, I might make an exception for his balls."

I'd had enough. My body was Jell-O. Victor and I leaned on one another as we walked out of the bar and into the elevator. He gave me a sloppy goodnight kiss that landed on my ear as we parted ways. I crawled under the covers and slept, but not before I spent a few unhappy moments envisioning Tommy lying in subterranean darkness, his legs shattered. He screamed and screamed for help that wouldn't arrive. I said, *"Yes, for the love of God."*

7

Sequim (pronounced *Skwim* by the locals) was lovely that summer. The town rested near the Dungeness River at the heart of a shallow basin of the Dungeness-Sequim Valley and not far from the bay. Fields of lavender and poppies and tulips dominated the countryside. There were farms and mills and old, dusty roads that wound between wooden fences and stands of oak and birch and poplar trees. Raymond Carver wrote a poem about Sequim. I'd never read that one.

Our merry band rolled into town after dark and, since Sequim was the kind of place that locked its doors at sundown, we proceeded directly to the bed and breakfast—a cute two-story farmhouse—where Glenn had rented our rooms. The proprietors were an elderly couple named Leland and Portia Teller. Mrs. Teller fixed us a nice dinner despite our being three hours late. Baked salmon, steamed carrots, sourdough bread, and ice cream and black coffee for dessert. After dinner, we sat on the front porch in a collection of rockers and a swing, and smoked cigarettes. Glenn shared one with Dane. They reclined on the swing and giggled like teenagers. The night was muggy and overcast. Lights were off all over town except for the neon flicker of a bar several blocks down and across the parking lot of a community baseball diamond.

It was a good thing I hadn't been drinking because watching Glenn casually indulge in a habit we'd mutually conquered at great physical and mental anguish ignited a slow burn in my chest. Were I drunk and vulnerable, God knows what I'd have done—wept, cursed him, slapped him, walked away into the night and disappeared. A half-dozen times I opened my mouth to say something sharp and ill-tempered. I mastered the

impulse. I knew how Glenn would react if I confronted him. He'd laugh and play it as a joke. Then we wouldn't talk for the rest of the trip.

I bit my tongue and moved to the opposite end of the porch and counted lights. Small towns disquieted me with their clannishness, their secretiveness, how everybody interacted as an extended, dirt-beneath-the fingernails family, how they scurried into their modernized huts as the sun set. A city boy was always a stranger, no matter how much money he spent, or how much he smiled. Being gay and from the wicked metropolis wasn't a winning combination with country folk.

Later, tucked as near the edge of the bed as possible, I studied the cover of the *Black Guide*, entranced by the broken ring. What was the significance? Its thickness, the suggestion of whorls, brought to mind images of the Ouroboros, the serpent eating its tail. This wasn't the Ouroboros. This was more wormlike, leechlike, and it disturbed me that it wasn't eating its tail. The jaws, the proboscis, the shearing appendage, were free to devour other, weaker delicacies.

8

The next day marked the opening celebrations of the Lavender Festival, an event that included a downtown farmers' market and fair, and a bus tour of the seven major lavender farms in the area. None of us were lavender aficionados, yet we'd all enjoyed the film *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, while Victor and I had also read the novel by Süskind.

There were two buses ready to ferry us around the area. I was grateful for the tinted windows and air conditioning as the temperature had already climbed into the nineties by eleven a.m. The sun hung low and blazed hellishly, but, secure in our plush seats behind dim glass, we laughed. Glenn surprised me by holding my hand. The bus was crowded with senior citizens and a smattering of sunburned couples and their raucous children. Nobody paid us any mind, nor did I think they would; however, his lack of customary reserve took me off guard. I accepted his overture as further rapprochement for hurting my feelings by smoking with Dane. Obviously he wished to appease my jealousy by jumping at the idea of the farm tour.

The tour was organized in the manner of a wine-tasting. We spent the long, insufferably hot day visiting restaurants and observing demonstrations of lavender's multifarious uses in the culinary arts. The traveling show wound down late in the afternoon and we loaded into the Land Rover and sped off in search of booze. The Sarcobatus Tavern was closest, and not too crowded despite the numerous tourists wandering the streets.

A half-dozen college-aged guys occupied a table near the bar. Clean-shaven, muscular, decked in regulation fraternity field attire—baseball caps, sweaters, cargo pants, and athletic shoes. There were a lot of empty bottles on the table. Clearly out of their element and heat-maddened, a couple of the kids gave us hard, bleary stares. "Damn it," I said. "What?" Glenn said, although he apparently noticed them too because he squeezed my elbow, then stepped away from me. Dane actually said hello to the group in a loud, gregarious tone. A burly kid wearing a Washington State University Cougars cap said something unfriendly and his friends clapped and jeered. Dane winked and flipped the double bird to each of them ("—and you, and you, and you, and you too, cutie pie!") with exaggerated gusto, and while the college boys fumed and sulked, he ordered a round of beers that we carried to the opposite corner of the tavern near a pinball machine with its cord pulled out of the wall.

"Great Scott," Glenn said a few moments after picking up a stray newspaper and scanning the headlines. It still amazed me that my lover seldom actually swore by means of shit, or asshole, or that hoary crowd-pleaser, fuck. No, with Glenn it was always hell, damn, holy cow, and Great Scott, and, on special occasions, jeepers and Zounds. I wasn't fully privy to the origin of this eccentricity, except to note it had to do with a fondness of Golden Age comics and an aversion to his father's egregious addiction to cursing, which I gather had been a subject of lifelong embarrassment. "Ten shot dead at a cantina in Ciudad Juarez. Two guys in motorcycle helmets ran in and opened fire with submachine guns. No leads. Police suspect it's connected to drugs…" We all snorted derisive laughter at his humor. Dane said, "Man, I really liked vacationing in Mexico. No way, Jose. That isn't any place for a gringo these days."

"It's not any place for *Mexicans*," Glenn said. "Eleven thousand people killed since 2006 via drug violence. I think you might be safer signing up

for Iraq."

"Nonsense—Cancun is safe as houses, as the Brits say," Victor said. "Um, sure, of course Cancun is safe," Glenn said, "but Cancun isn't Mexico. It's an American college resort. Home away from home of damn fool tourists and yon Neanderthals."

"The hell you say!"

"Cancun's *technically* Mexico, just not the *real* Mexico."

"What about Cabo?"

"Fake Mexico."

"I wanna Corona," Dane said. "Hey, barkeep, four Coronas. A ripe lemon wedge this time, for the love of Baby Jesus. Now, friends, let us weep for poor old May-he-co."

We drank our beers and decided the hour had come to mosey out of town. I went into the restroom and pissed and when I returned only three of the frat brothers were still hanging around the tavern. Music from outside throbbed through the window glass. I found everybody else in the parking lot, a fist-fight already in progress. Dane was on one knee, pressed against the wheel well of a truck tricked out with oversized tires and radio antenna. The truck's headlights were on, its door was open and radio speakers boomed "Four Kicks" by The Kings of Leon. Cougars-cap and two of the other guys stood in a semicircle and were punching him in the head. His scalp and nose ran with blood. Darkness had fallen and his blood flowed black in the neon lighting.

I lunged and Glenn caught my arm. "Don't get in his way, baby." Dane bellowed and surged to his feet, scattering his opponents. He slapped Cougars-cap on the ear. While the kid held his ear and shrieked, Dane snatched the antenna off the truck and began whipping all three of them. He grinned through a mask of gore, cocking his forearm behind his neck and then slashing in an elegant diamond pattern. The dying sun limned him in gold. He was a Viking god exacting retribution on his foes. The hair on my arms prickled and I gaped in awe. Then Glenn yelled and I turned and partially blocked a golf club swung at my head. The other three frat boys had followed us—Glenn rolled around on the ground with the guy who'd tackled him. Another went after Victor, who adroitly fled behind the Land

Rover. I had a moment to admire at the lightness of his step. The golf club made a *thwock!* as it struck my upraised arm. The pain cranked a rotor in my brain and turned operation over to the lizard. I laughed with rage and joy and impending lunacy.

I caught the golf club as my attacker—a J. Crew pretty boy—readied for another crack at me, and wrenched him off balance. I kneed him in the balls. He vomited and slumped on all fours and I grabbed his hair and kneed him in the jaw, twice, with enthusiasm. His nose and jaw squished nicely. He crawled away spewing blood and teeth as he shrieked. The other punk sat astride Glenn's chest and they were choking one another. I drove the toe of my steel-toed boot into the frat boy's kidney and he recoiled like a worm zapped by an electrode. He went purple almost instantly as his throat shut, paralyzed. Glenn rolled him over and proceeded to smash his face. The notion that someone might actually die in the fracas flickered through my mind, but my will to put the brakes on melted fast as the ultra violence swept me along.

Pivoting again, I saw Victor had scooted up onto the windshield of the Land Rover, kicking wildly. His opponent belly-flopped across the hood, intent on clambering atop him. I grabbed the kid's ankles and jerked him backward, dragged him over the jaggedy hood ornament, hoisting his legs as in a game of wheelbarrow so his face slid down the grille, clunked off the bumper and slammed into the asphalt. I dropped his legs. He didn't move as blood seeped in a puddle around his head. A shadow passed through my peripheral vision. Dane seized one of the poor bastards by the crotch and neck and gorilla pressed him overhead. I'd not seen anything like that in my entire life, but there it was, Dane raising him up in a Frazetta pose from the cover of a Conan novel. Dane tossed him against the side of the truck. The frat boy bounced and landed on his shoulder and neck and Dane methodically lined up and drop-kicked him in the ribs. Like me, Dane wore heavy-duty boots, although his didn't have any metal reinforcement. It sounded like an axe whacking into a log. Magnificent.

The bartender stood in the doorway of the tavern. I waved at her and the kid whose jaw I'd certainly broken chucked a loose piece of concrete at me and it caromed off my temple. I was still flattened on the ground trying to shake free of the red haze as Cougars-cap wrapped himself around Dane's

leg and bit him in the thigh. Somebody's boot thumped my left butt cheek. Victor came swooping in and snatched up the concrete chunk and hurled it, chasing away whomever was trying to punt my ass up around my shoulders. He helped me to my feet, and in the nick of time—Glenn went to the Land Rover and rummaged around under the front seat. He came around with a shiny, tiny automatic. Me and Victor got hold of him and I took the pistol away and stuck it in my pocket. Meanwhile, Dane elbowed poor Cougars-cap (the cap had flown off long since) on the crown of his skull until the frat boy stopped gnawing his leg and curled into a fetal position. The rest—the ones still ambulatory—had fled at the appearance of the gun.

"Jesus jumping Christ!" Victor said. "We gotta bail before the heat gets here and guns us down like dogs!"

"Shit, where'd you get the piece? Do you even have a permit?" I said to Glenn. His eyes were wild. "That time those gang-bangers cornered us in Rainier," he said. "I went to a pawn shop the next day." I said, "Oh, for the love of… nothing happened. They were just screwing with us." It scared and hurt me he'd gone to such an extreme and then successfully kept a secret for this long. The bus incident was two years gone and I'd not suspected it affected him so deeply. This trip was proving to be painfully educational. He looked away. "Not going to ever take chances again. Say what you like." I wanted to grab his collar and shake some sense into him. Things were moving too fast, my emotional equilibrium, my sense of security in our private little world together, was sliding from under my feet.

"So long, fuckers!" Dane said, vaunting as Achilles had after wreaking havoc among his foes before the walls of Troy. He stomped Cougars-cap's splayed hand. We piled into the truck. I shouldn't have been driving with what was a probable concussion and all the blood dripping into my eyes, but nobody else volunteered. I smoked rubber.

9

I pulled into a Rite Aid and killed the engine. Victor was the only one of us who didn't look as if somebody had dumped a bucket of pig's blood over his head. He ran in and bought bandages, dental floss, cotton balls, Ibuprofen, medicinal alcohol, and two cases of Natty Ice.

Dane draped a towel over his face and it turned red. “Now this takes me back to the good ol’ days,” he said. His voice sounded nasally because his nose was smashed to a pulp. “We should get to an emergency room,” Glenn said. His eye was blackened and he’d ruined his shirt on the asphalt. Otherwise, he’d escaped the battle relatively unscathed. He checked my scalp. The bleeding had mostly stopped. My left arm was swollen and purple from where the golf club had caught me. Sharp pains radiated from my foot. I figured it got stepped on in the confusion. “No hospital,” I said. “If the cops are looking for us, we’ll get nailed. Dane, I hope to God you didn’t pay with a credit card back there.”

“What? No, man, I paid cash. I always pay cash if I think there’s gonna be a rumble.”

“You thought there was going to be a fight?”

“Actually, I *knew* there’d be one. I decided to beat the hell out of those punks the minute we walked in. They rubbed me the wrong way.”

“That lady bartender probably got our plates anyhow,” Victor said. He cracked beers and handed them around. “Oh, man. Warm Natty sucks. Might as well gimme a can of watery cream corn,” Dane said. “Guess if you’re going to keep tangling with gangs of frat boys half your age you’d best cultivate a taste for creamed food in general, eh?” I said. Dane hissed in pain. “Yep, yep. Busted tooth. One of those assholes knocked it loose and I just swallowed the damn thing. Ha, Glenn tell you about the bikers we thrashed at a Willie Nelson concert? That’s why I’ve got so much gold in my grill.”

“Willie Nelson?”

“Everybody loves Willie,” Glenn said. “Vicky, are you serious? You going to stitch the Danester’s scalp with dental floss?”

Victor poured a capful of alcohol across a needle. “I can do it. Willem says no hospital. I am confident Hagar the Horrible is with Willem on this one—right sweetie?”

“Right,” Dane said in his rusty, honking voice. “Besides, we still got some camping to do. That park is what, an hour from here? Let’s make ourselves scarce in case Johnny Law comes round.” Glenn said, “Look, boys. I’m not

exactly high on roughing it in the boonies at the moment. I think we should get back to Seattle and soak away our misery in the hot tub. Willem?"

The adrenaline hadn't completely worn off, nor the rush from the sense of admiration I'd received from my comrades. I wasn't about to let Dane out-tough me. "I'm game for the park. Another case of beer and some ice for the cooler and we're good to go." Glenn took my face in his hands. He said in a whisper, "You look like you got hit in the head with a rock, my dear."

"Is that what it was?" I said. He kissed my nose. "You are such a Billy badass."

"Yee-haw!" I cheered sotto voce. Victor finished stitching Dane's lacerated scalp. He washed his hands in the alcohol, then returned to the store for bags of ice and more beer. I drove east from Sequim along the Old Mystery Mountain Highway, a two-lane blacktop in major decline. It carried us up from the valley floor into big timber along the flank of Mystery Mountain. I dodged potholes while keeping an eye on the rearview mirror for police flashers. Occasionally, deer froze in the sweep of the headlights, eyes glittering from the brush and ferns at the road's edge. I'd expected heavy July traffic, but there weren't any other cars in sight. Glenn said, "Jeepers, kinda creepy through here, isn't it?"

"Yeah, Fred," Victor said. "You should paint the pimp-mobile green and slap a flower on the door."

"Don't forget to recruit a hot, clueless Catholic school dropout and a not so hot dyke," Dane said. But Glenn was right—the woods were spooky. Mist thickened and clung to the bushes. Cold air rushed across my feet. I turned on the heater. Glenn explained that this road once served as the main access for several towns. A railroad line ran parallel, lost somewhere in the dark. A lot of timber was hacked down in the days of yore, although from my vantage the wilderness had recovered and then some.

Glenn unfolded a road atlas and studied it by flashlight. Victor told the story about the couple driving through woods—*just like these!*—while a radio broadcast reports the escape of inmates from a local asylum. Of course the car breaks down and the boyfriend leaves his girl locked up while he goes for help and all through the night she hears noises. She cowers on the floorboard as someone tries the door handles. The wind rises

and branches scrape the roof. She wakes in broad daylight to the police rapping on the window. Upon exiting the car she glances back and witnesses her boyfriend hanging upside down from a tree limb, his bloody fingernails scratching the roof as his corpse sways in the breeze…

"No asylums in these parts," I said. "On the other hand, there might be ghouls and goblins. The Klallam peoples spoke of demons that dwelt among the trees and in the earth. The white pioneers sure came to believe some of the tales." I'd read about this and other eerie factoids in the guide. Victor pressed another beer into my hand. Even though I didn't dare lift my gaze from the twisting road, I felt my companions' attention focused on me. This convinced me Victor wasn't kidding when he said they were all way into the supernatural during college. Were circumstances otherwise I would've changed the subject, but I felt like a piece of meat tenderized by a mallet; the fight had drained from me, replaced by the fatalistic urge to confess or pontificate, which was an indicator I'd breached my alcohol threshold.

To distract myself from the excruciating pain in my foot, arm, and skull, I dredged up my research from the pages of the *Black Guide* and explained how according to local legends, diabolical spirits lurked in fissures and caverns of the mountains and the rivers and lakes and assumed the guise of loved ones, or beautiful strangers, and lured hunters and fishermen to their doom. There was even a tale of the Slango logging camp that vanished during the 1920s. The spirits seized unwary men and dragged them into the depths and feasted upon them, or worse. Victor wondered what "worse" meant. I assumed worse meant torture or transformation. The demons might lobotomize their victims and change them into something inhuman. As it was a cautionary branch of native mythology, it was doubtless left vague as storytellers couldn't hope to match whatever horrors were conjured by the imaginations of their audiences. "Maybe the monsters enslave the ones they don't eat," he said in a half-serious manner. I flashed to dead Tom lying in an unmarked tomb and wondered if Victor was sharing that unwholesome thought. I drained my beer and gestured for another.

"Now I really, really want to go camping," Glenn said. "The turn should be on the right. Another three miles or so." Victor screamed and I almost swerved the Land Rover into the ditch. Considering the size of the trees, we

would’ve likely been squashed like a can of soup under a steamroller. Glenn and Dane yelled at Victor for almost making them pee their pants. I didn’t say anything; I glimpsed his expression in the rearview. His eyes were shiny as quarters in Glenn’s flashlight beam.

“Dude, what was that?” Dane said. “Willem almost hit a deer? Spider climb into your shorts? What?”

“Sorry, guys. I looked back to the storage compartment and something moved.”

“WTF? One of those Native American bogeymen of Willem’s? It have red eyes?”

“Yeah. Bright red as the Devil. That’s why I yelled.”

“You didn’t yell, you screamed.”

“Because a black form moved in the back of the truck and its eyes glowed. Course I screamed. Diabolical Disney cartoon shit going down, I’m giving a shout out. Just Glenn’s coat, though. Headlight’s reflected off the mile marker must’ve lit up the tape on the sleeves.”

“Glad that’s solved and we aren’t parked inside one of these ginormous cedars.”

I almost pulled over and asked Glenn to drive. Victor’s cry had shaken me and the mist was screwing with my vision, because as I considered Victor’s explanation, shadows slipped among the shrubbery a few yards ahead. Smaller than deer, and lower to the ground. I counted three of these jittery, fast-moving shapes before they melted into the greater darkness. Coyotes? Dogs? My febrile imagination powered by dopamine, a fistful of Ibuprofen, and God knew how many beers? The heavy, ponderous vehicle seemed fragile now, and I imagined how it must appear from above—a lonely speck trundling through an immense forest. Mild vertigo hit me and the vehicle swayed just enough to cause an intake of breath from Glenn. I clamped my jaw and rallied.

Thick branches obscured the Mystery Mountain Campground signpost, but I saw it in time and braked hard and swung into a gravel lane. I proceeded a hundred yards to the darkened ranger shack. A carved wooden sign read CAMPGROUND FULL. A few lights glimmered through the trees. A

Winnebago was the closest vehicle. Its occupants, a family of four dressed in identical bright orange shirts, clustered around a meager fire roasting hotdogs. “Argh—we forgot the bloody marshmallows,” Victor said.

“Maybe it’s for the best there’s no room at the inn,” Glenn said. “The rangers might be on the lookout for us too.” Victor said, “Aw, who cares. What now?”

The road forked: the paved section veered to the right and into the campground. The leftward path was unpaved and led into the boonies. If the *Black Guide* was accurate, this was the southern terminus of a logging road network that crisscrossed the mountains. The Kalamov Dolmen lay at the end of a footpath a few miles ahead. I said, “Two-thirds of a tank. I say we cruise up the trail and find a place to bivouac.” The others agreed and I eased the rig along the washboard lane. It climbed and climbed. Brush closed in tight and lashed the windows.

A hillside rose steeply to my left. The hillside was covered in uprooted trees and rocks and boulders. A few of the rocks had tumbled loose and lay scattered in the path. I picked my way through them; some were the size of bowling balls. Victor and Glenn warned me to hug the left-hand side of the road as they were looking at a precipitous drop. I glanced over at the tops of trees below us, a phantom picket floating in an abyss. Erosion and debris narrowed the lane until the Land Rover had perhaps a foot to spare between its wheels and the cliff. I halted and shut off the engine and engaged the parking brake. I asked Victor to get my rucksack from behind his seat and hand me the humidor in the belly pouch.

“Oh, snap,” Victor said. “Honduran?”

“Nicaraguan,” I said. “Be a love and snip one for me. Glenn, that bottle of scotch still in the glove box?” He knew better than to say a word. He rummaged through the compartment, retrieved the quarter bottle of Laphroaig and popped the cap. I had a slug of whiskey, then accepted the cigar from Victor and got it burning with Victor’s lighter. The sweet, harsh taste filled my mouth and lungs, sent a rush of energy through me. I exhaled and watched the smoke curl against the windshield. Nobody spoke. The only sound was the tick of cooling metal and Dane’s wet breathing. “I saved these for a special occasion. A wedding, a funeral, a conjugal visit. But,

hell… no better time for scotch and cigars than right before you roll your rusted-out Land Rover over a two-hundred-foot cliff. You boys help yourselves." Glenn and Victor lighted cigars. Dane said no thanks and held the towel to his face again. He said, "You up to this, Willem?" Glenn said, "He's got it handled. He drove transports in the Army."

"Oh. I didn't realize you'd been in the military," Dane said. "Thanks a lot, Glenn." Glenn shrugged. "He doesn't like to spread it around. So I don't."

"Hell, man. Thanks for all you guys do." Dane roused himself and leaned over and patted my shoulder. "Were you in Iraq?"

"Yugoslavia. They stationed me in Kosovo for a year. And no, I didn't shoot anybody. I drove transports." We sat like that for a while. Finally, I drained the scotch and threw the bottle on the floorboard at Glenn's feet. I turned the key and pegged it.

10

Eventually the grade leveled and swung away from the cliff. I parked in the middle of the road near a stand of fir trees. We pitched the tent by headlight beam, unrolled our sleeping bags, and collapsed. "Wait," Glenn said. "We need to make a bargain." He sounded strange, but it'd been a strange day. My heart beat faster. Dane and Victor kept quiet and that chilled me somehow, lending weight to the word *bargain.* These guys knew from bargains, didn't they? Glenn said, "Look, after what happened in town… maybe we'll get lucky and nobody will press charges. But, wow, Dane. You might've ruined a couple of those guys."

"I hope I smashed their guts out."

"Be serious." The edge in Glenn's voice surprised me. I wished I could see his face. "I'm not asking for anything heavy. Let's just promise to see this through, okay? Will, I'm so proud of you. We were going to tuck our tails and go yipping home. Thanks for showing grit. The plan was to camp out a couple of nights and see the dolmen. That's what we should do. Tommy would approve." The mention of dead Tom gave me the creeps and it reminded me how hurt I was that Glenn still hadn't confided the truth to me. Mostly, though, it gave me the creeps. Dane and Victor muttered acquiescence to Glenn's rather nebulous charge and we did the hand over

hand thing, like a sports team. It was all awkward and phony, yet deadly serious in a Boy Scout way, and I squirmed and went along. Right before we fell asleep, I pulled him close and murmured, “We’re going to talk about the gun when we get home.” He kissed me, and put his cheek against my chest.

I dreamt horror-show dreams and woke panicked, Glenn mumbling into my ear, sunlight blazing through the mesh of the tent flap. I crawled outside and vomited. My skull felt as if a football team had taken turns stomping it with cleats. I couldn’t make a fist with my left hand. From wrist to elbow, my arm was puffed like a black and purple sausage. The possibility I might have a hairline fracture further soured my mood.

“Man alive, I thought a bear was ralphing in the blueberry bushes,” Dane said. His face resembled a bowl of mashed potatoes with the skins still on. He hunched on a log near the cold fire pit. The end of the log was charred to a point. I started to laugh and puked again. I worried my nausea might be due to a cerebral hematoma rather than a hangover, but it was pointless to follow that line of thought. Until I could find a loop, intersection, or wide spot in the road, we were committed to this rustic interlude of the vacation. No way was I man enough to back the truck down to the campground.

Glenn and Victor emerged from the lair. Glenn didn’t look nearly as bad as Dane, but his black eye was impressive and he limped and complained about pissing blood. Dane told him pissing blood was a rite of passage (then corrected it as “pissage” to some effect). I broke out the propane camp stove and boiled water for coffee and instant oatmeal. Dane poured two fingers of Schnapps from his hip flask over his oatmeal and I almost barfed again. He grinned at us, and I saw that yes, indeed, he’d lost a tooth during the skirmish. His lip was fat and blistered and Victor tenderly dabbed it with a napkin as they huddled together and shared a mug of coffee.

Glenn spread the Triple-A roadmap of Washington State on the ground and weighed down the corners with rocks. “We’re in *this* general vicinity.” He poked the map with a dead stick. “Unfortunately, the area is represented as a green blob. No roads, nothing. Green blobbiness, and more green blobbiness. Willem?”

I fetched the *Black Guide* and opened it to the relevant entry which was accompanied by a rude sketch not unlike the Hollywood-popularized treasure maps, and cryptic directions such as—*Left at ravine* and *Keep north of Devil Tower. 'Ware crevasse. Leech.* "The dolmen is about twelve miles yonder. I propose we pull stakes and ease along a bit. Got to find a spot to turn this beast around." I indicated the Land Rover. "Good grief," Glenn said. "I didn't realize how far seventeen miles was when we were sitting around the bar back in Seattle." Dane said, "I'm with Willem—let's see what's over the next hill, so to speak. As for that dolmen, the more I think on it, the more I think we've been had. There aren't any goddamned dolmens in this part of the world. I ought a know, Eric The Red being kin and such."

"This whole expedition is your idea!" Victor swatted his shoulder. "There better be a 'dolmen' or I'm kicking your ass back down this mountain."

"Yo, man. Don't get so excited. I said dolmen, not Dolemite."

Breaking camp proved twice the job as setting it up because everyone was hurting from the previous evening's brutality—we hobbled like old men and it was noon before we got packed and moving. Glenn took over at the wheel while I navigated. With my arm injury, I couldn't be trusted to keep the rig out of the ditch. The road continued along the mountainside, wending its way through a series of valleys. Our path intersected a handful of decrepit logging roads. There were occasional fields where forest had been leveled to stumps and roots, but nothing more recent than a decade or two. "Who comes out here if not loggers?" Victor said. I said, "Mountain bikers. Hikers. Doper growers. Game wardens and surveyors. The state keeps tabs, I'm sure. The timber companies will be back with chainsaws buzzing sooner or later."

"Think anybody owns land, a house? Y'know, regular people."

The Land Rover hit a pothole and I almost flew through the windshield. "Nah," I said. "Imagine what this will be like when it rains in September. A man would need mules to get around." The ravines were steep and rugged with exposed rock and descended into cool, fuzzy shadows that never quite melted even during this, the hottest span of summer. Ridgelines hemmed the winding road, topped by evergreens and redwoods. Rabbits shot across

our path. Far below in the vast crease of the landscape was the highway and civilization, obscured by a shifting blue haze. A hawk glided in the breeze.

As the afternoon light reddened near the horizon, we arrived at a T-intersection. There was a convenient site bracketed by several trees and a picturesque scatter of boulders, a couple the approximate height and girth of the Land Rover, and it reminded me of a scene from a western film where the cowboys sit around a cozy fire in the badlands, eating beans and drinking coffee from tin cups. If the guide was to be trusted, a semi-hidden footpath to the dolmen lay about a quarter of a mile down the southerly wending road. From there the anonymous author claimed it to be an hour's hike to the dolmen.

Once the tent was pitched we took stock of our supplies and determined that between trail mix, canned hash, chili, and fruit cocktail, three five-gallon Jerry cans of water, and a case of beer, the situation was golden for another night, and possibly two should the next day's expedition prove too exhausting. Dane and Glenn took a hatchet into the woods and chopped several armloads of firewood while Victor dug a shallow pit and lined it with stones. I munched aspirin and supervised. Glenn had made me sling from a shirt. I wore it to be on the safe side, and because it reduced the pain in my arm to the category of a toothache.

Night crept over the wilderness and the temperature cooled rapidly. Dane lighted a roaring bonfire and boiled a pot of chili and we washed that down with the better part of the case of beer. After supper, Glenn unpacked a teapot and mugs and fixed us instant cocoa. We sipped cocoa while Victor played a harmonica he'd bought in Seattle for the occasion.

"Dear God, not the harmonica," Dane said, and spat a gob of blood into the fire. His nose was definitely broken. He'd crunched it back into joint himself, much to my horror—at which Glenn and Victor snickered and mocked my squeamishness. Evidently, they'd seen this show many a time during their debauched college adventures.

Glenn fiddled with the transistor radio until he dialed in a grainy, but reasonably clear signal—a canned programming station playing big band music from the 1930s and '40s. Victor rolled his eyes and tossed the harmonica through the open window of the truck. He rolled a couple of

joints and we passed them around. Talk turned to the macabre and I entertained them with Baba Yaga legends I'd heard around similar campfires while stationed in Eastern Europe; then Glenn and Dane discussed their favorite horror movies, most of which I knew by heart, and I nodded off, lulled by their easy laughter, the warmth of the fire.

Victor said something about "doorways" and I snapped awake, but missed the rest as he and the others were speaking softly. He said, "It's only a coincidence." Dane said, "Come on, dude. Don't even start down that road —" I cleared my throat. "What road?" Victor said, "The road not taken, of course. I need to shake hands with the Governor—ta, ta, my lovelies!" He rose and walked into the shadows. "That's a wrap—I'm for bed," Glenn said, and he kissed me and headed for the tent. Dane stared into the flames and the red light bathed his ravaged face, and he glanced at me as if about to speak. He smiled, a sad, pained smile, and followed Glenn.

Victor returned, zipping his fly. "C'mere, pull up a rock." I patted the log I was sitting on. He settled next to me, his posture stiff as a plank. Soon, Dane's snores drifted from the tent and Victor's shoulders relaxed. He tossed some dead leaves and twigs onto the fire, and said quietly, "What's on your mind, Will, old bean?" He was high as a kite.

"Not much. The book. Weird, weird thing happened to me before we left on the trip." I told him, as I had Glenn, about Tom's visitation, except I didn't pull any punches. As I spoke, Victor's expression became increasingly unhappy. He fumbled in his pocket for a pack of cigarettes and lighted one with apparent difficulty. He offered me a drag. I declined and said, "Glenn didn't tell you, huh? I sort of figured he would've."

"This explains a lot. No wonder he's treated me like I'm loony tunes for… He prefers to pretend we weren't a pack of superstitious nerds in college. Dane follows his lead. It's a survival tool. The front office in Denver sucks —they don't even know Dane is gay. And the hoodoo aspect—that shit ain't cool now that we're *grownups*. Getting your face punched like a speed bag is trendy; crystal meditation and *The Golden Bough* reading circle is for wackos. I mention anything along those lines, Dane gives me the stink eye and Glenn changes subjects like he's a senator putting the moves on the press corps. Why are we talking about it?"

“Because I can tell you want to. You aren’t the kind of guy to keep deep, dark secrets.”

“The thing with Tommy isn’t really a deep, dark secret. A minor scandal. I had a bed-wetter type dream about him the other night. Neither of the other bozos dream about him, which seems unfair. But whatever, man. I couldn’t stand him and you didn’t even know him, yet we’re the schleps who’ve got him on the brain.”

“Seems rather simple to me,” I said. “He’s obviously haunting you from beyond the grave. You stole Dane away, then he got killed in a tragic manner that trapped his soul on the material plane.”

“Oh, yeah? He didn’t care for Dane like that. Well, fuck, maybe he did. Tommy loved to hump and he didn’t seem too picky regarding with whom. What’s he messing with you for?”

“He’s not messing with either of us. I was checking your credulity.”

“You got me, Tex. I’m a credulous motherfucker these days. Our boys are goddamned credulous too, if you could get them to cop to it. You’re a devious one. Funny, you and Glenn getting together. He’s such a rube.” I chuckled. “Yeah, yeah, Glenn is as pure as the driven snow. Plus, unlike us his family was damned progressive. A well-adjusted man’s one of my turn-ons.”

“That’s the attraction?”

“He reads. He can be a devil. I like that a whole lot.”

“He’s hot and makes a heap of money.”

“Goodness, Vicky, you’re a real bitch when you want.” I didn’t mean anything by that, however. His bluntness was sweet in its own way.

The fire burned low. Victor stood and stretched. “I was raised Pentecostal. Got any idea what that’s like? I saw a few things you wouldn’t believe. My daddy was a snake-handlin’, babblin’ in tongues psycho-sonofabitch, let me tell you what. I’ve no problem with the plausibility of the fundamentally implausible after witnessing my daddy and two uncles cast ‘demons’ from my cousin one sultry, backwoods night. I can’t say I’m religious, but I surely do believe we aren’t alone on this mortal coil. There are frightful things lurking in the shadows.”

I remembered the woman's voice whispering in the dark—*There are frightful things.* I got goose bumps. He said, "Something else I didn't mention when I told you about the dreams I had of Tommy. I think I pushed it down into my subconscious. Whenever I first see him, for a split second he's somebody else. He covers his face with his hands, as if he's rubbing his eyes, or sobbing, and when he looks up, it's him, smiling this evil little smile. Once in a while, he ducks his head and pantomimes pulling on a ski mask. Same thing—it's him again. The act bothers the fuck outta me. Anyway. Goodnight."

Shadows from the dying fire capered against the trunks of the trees and the boulders nearby. The goose bumps returned and I recognized the nauseated thrill in my stomach as a reaction to being watched. This sense of being observed was powerful and I became conscious again of our frailty, the dim sliver of firelight, the flimsy shelter of the tent, our insignificance. I massaged my aching forearm. Farther out, branches crashed and grew still.

A few minutes passed as I listened to the night. Weariness overcame my nerves. I decided to make for the tent and as I rose, a large, dark shape emerged from the brush and moved onto the road about seventy feet away. There was sufficient starlight to discern its bulky outline, a patch of thicker blackness against the blurry backdrop, but not enough to identify individual features. It had to be a bear, and so I'm sure my brain gave it a bearlike shape. Bears didn't particularly frighten me—I'd gone hunting on occasion as a teen and hiked plenty since. Bears, cougars, moose; critters could be reliably expected to live and let live. This encounter, however, alarmed me. Had the cooking smells drawn it in? Glenn's gun lay snug in my pocket since the brawl, but that didn't comfort me—it was a .25 automatic with no stopping power; more likely to infuriate a bear than kill it.

The animal stood in the center of the road and there was no mistaking it was staring at me. Then another shape appeared near the first and that caused my balls to tighten. The second animal rose directly from the road, as if the shadows had coalesced into solid form, and as it materialized I noted that even obscured by darkness, it didn't resemble any bear I'd ever seen. The beast was too lean, too angular; the neck and forelegs were abnormally long, and its skull lopsided and cumbersome. I pulled the automatic and chambered a round. I considered calling to my companions,

but hesitated because of the impression this entire situation was balanced on the edge of some terrible consequence and any precipitous action on my part would initiate the chain reaction.

There are terrible things.

A cloud rolled across the stars and as the darkness thickened, the animals moved in an unnatural, sideways fashion, an undulation at odds with their bulk, and vanished. Symbols of warning conjured from night mist and shadows; ill omens dispensed, they drained back into the earth. I half-crouched, gun in my fist, until my legs cramped. A scream echoed far off from one of the hidden gulches, and I almost blew a hole in my foot. It took me a long while to convince myself it had been the cry of a bear or a wildcat and not a human.

By then it was dawn.

11

During breakfast I relayed my encounter with the mystery animals, floating the idea that perhaps we should skip the hike. “Wow, a couple of bears outside? Why didn’t you get us up? I would’ve loved to see that.” Victor seemed truly disappointed while Dane and Glenn dismissed my concerns that we might run afoul of them during the day. Dane said, “We’ll just let Vicky run his yapper while we walk. Bears will hear that a mile away and beat it for the hills.”

“Gonna be hotter than the hobs of Hades,” Glenn said after shrugging on his backpack. “What the hell are hobs?” Dane said. “Hubs, farm boy,” Glenn said. “Don’t neglect your canteens, fellow campers. Put on some sunscreen. Bring extra socks.”

“How far we going? The Andes?”

“It’s a surprise. Let’s move out.”

I took the lead, *Moderor de Caliginis* in hand. The sky shone a hard, brilliant blue and I already sweated from the rising heat. Fortunately, half the road lay in shadow and we kept to that. I felt rather absurd trudging along like a pith-helmeted explorer in a black and white pulp film, novelty

almanac map clutched in a death grip—Dane and Glenn even carried the requisite hatchets and machetes.

Despite my morbid curiosity, it would've relieved me if the book had proved inaccurate, if we'd tromped for an hour or two until my comrades grew hot and irritable and voted to call it a trip and bolt for civilization. The beating I'd received in Sequim had taken its toll and I just wanted to face the music, to deal with any legal repercussions of the battle royal and then soak in the hot tub for a month.

But, there it was behind a screen of bushes and rocks—the path, little more than a deer trail, angled away from the road and climbed through a ravine overgrown with brush and ferns. There weren't any trail markers, nor recent footprints. We picked our way over mossy stones and deadfalls, pausing frequently to sip from our canteens and for Dane and Victor to share a cigarette. Victor unlimbered his camera and snapped numerous pictures. Walking was slightly difficult with the sling throwing off my balance. Glenn stayed close, taking my elbow whenever I stumbled.

We pressed onward and upward, past a dozen points where the game trail forked and I would've lost the way if not for the landmarks detailed in the guide entry and by the subtle blazes the author had slashed into the bark of trees along the way. I whistled under my breath. My companions were silent but for the occasional grunt or curse. A similar hush had fallen over the woods.

We rounded a bend and came to a spot where the trail forked yet again, except this time both paths were wider and recently trod by boots. Glenn spotted the ruins a second before I did and just after Dane wondered aloud if we'd gotten lost and pegged me in the back with a pinecone. "Everybody, hold on!" Glenn kept his voice low and pointed along the secondary path where it passed through a notch in the trees. I swept the area with binoculars. There was a clearing beyond the screen of trees, and piles of burned logs, like a palisade had ignited into an inferno. Further in, discrete piles of charcoal debris glittered with bits of melted glass. This appeared to be the old ruins of an encampment, or a village. I could imagine a mob of men in tri-corner hats loitering about, priming their muskets.

“This is weird,” Victor said. “You guys think this is weird?” I said, “In my opinion this qualifies as weird. Also highly unsettling.”

“Unsettling?” Dane said. Victor said, “Well duh. Don’t know about you, but I’m picking up a creepy vibe. I dare you to walk down there and see if anybody’s around.”

“There’s nothing left,” Dane said. Victor said, “That path didn’t make itself. *Somebody* uses it. Like I said, walk your sweet little butt down there and take a gander.”

“Not a chance,” Dane said, and briefly mimed plucking strings as he hummed “Dueling Banjos.”

Glenn took the binoculars and walked uphill to get a better vantage. He slowly lowered the glasses and held them toward me. “Will…” I joined him and scanned where he pointed. Offset from the main ruins, a canted stone tower rose four or so stories. The tower was scorched and blackened and draped in moss and creepers, on a slight rise and surrounded by the remnants of a fieldstone wall. Window slots were bricked over and it was surmounted by a crenellated parapet. “Anything about this in the guide?” he said. I told him about the *Devil Tower* notation. “I thought the entry referred to a rock formation, or a dead tree. Not a real live fucking tower.”

“Something strange about that thing,” Dane said. “Besides the fact it’s the completely wrong continent and time period for a medieval piece of architecture, and that said architecture is sitting on the side of a mountain in the Pacific Northwest, miles from any human habitation?” Victor said. Dane said, “Yeah, besides that. I’ve seen it before—in a book or a movie. Fucked if I remember, though. I mean, it looks like it should be on the moor, Boris Karloff working the front door when the dumbass travelers stop for the night.”

“How much farther?” Glenn said. I consulted the book. “Close.”

He said, “Unless you guys want to hunt for souvenirs in the burn piles, let’s mosey.” None of us liked the ruins enough to hang around and we continued walking.

Fifteen minutes later, we arrived at our destination. The trail wound under the arch of a toppled dead log, and ended in a large hollow partially ringed by firs and hemlocks. The hollow was a shadowy-green amphitheatre that

smelled of moist, decayed leaves and musty earth. Directly ahead, reared the dolmen—two squat pillars of rock supporting a third, enormous slab. I was amazed by its cyclopean dimensions. The dolmen was seated near the slope of the hill and blanketed with moss, and at its base ferns and patches of devil's club. It woke in me a profound unease that was momentarily overshadowed by my awe that the structure actually existed.

None of us spoke at first; we stood close together and took in our surroundings. Glenn squeezed my wrist and pressed his hip against mine. Victor hadn't taken a single picture, demonstrably cowed upon encountering something so far beyond his reckoning, and Dane's mouth actually hung open. I whispered into Glenn's ear, "The History Channel isn't quite the same, is it?" He smiled and pecked my cheek. That broke the tension and, after shucking their packs, the others began exploring the hollow. My uneasiness remained, a burr that I couldn't work loose. I checked the book again—the author hadn't written much about the site proper, nor documented any revelations about its history or importance besides the astronomical diagrams in the appendix. I stowed the guide and tried to set aside my misgivings as well.

The moss that bearded the dolmen was also thick upon the ground and it sucked at my boots as it sucked at the voices of my friends and the daylight itself. I thought of lying in a sticky web, of drowsing in the heart of a cocoon. The pain in my arm spiked and I shook off the sudden lassitude. We approached within a few feet of the tomb and stared into the opening. This made me queasy, like peering over the lip of a pit. This was a stylized maw, the mossy path its unfurled tongue.

"This isn't right," Glenn said. Victor and Dane flanked us, so our group stood before the structure in a semicircle. "A hoax?" I said without conviction, thinking of the artificial Stonehenge modern entrepreneurs had erected in Eastern Washington as a tourist attraction. "I don't think so," Glenn said. "But, I've seen a few of these in France. They don't look like this at all. The pile of rocks is close. That other stuff, I dunno." The stones were covered in runes and glyphs. Time had eroded deep grooves and incisions into shallow, blurred lines of demarcation. Lichen and horrid white fungi filled the crevices and spread in festering keloids.

Dane forged ahead and boldly slashed at some of the creepers, revealing more carvings. Fat, misshapen puffball mushrooms nested in beds among the creepers and his machete hacked across some and they disintegrated in clouds of red smoke. I joined him at the threshold and shined the beam of my flashlight through the swirling motes of mushroom dust, illuminating a chamber eight feet wide and twenty feet deep. Stray fingers of reddish sunlight came through small gaps. Vines had penetrated inside and lay in slimy, rotten loops and wallows along the edges of the foundation. My hair brushed against the slick threshold and beetles and pill bugs recoiled from our intrusion. Just inside, the chamber vaulted to a height of fifteen feet and was decorated with multitudes of fantastical carvings of symbols and creatures and stylized visages of the kind likely dreamt by Neanderthals. The far end of the chamber dug into the mountain; a wall of shale and granite sundered by long past seismic violence into a vertical crack, its plates and ridges splattered rust orange by alkaline water oozing from rock.

The floor was composed of dirt and sunken flagstones, and at its center, a low mound of crumbling granite that was an oblong basin, the opposite rim worked into the likeness of a massive, bloated humanoid. The statue was worn smooth and darkened by grime with only vague hollows for its eyes and mouth in a skull too proportionally small for its torso.

I clicked off the flashlight and allowed my eyes to adjust to the crimson gloom. “Okay, I’m thunderstruck,” Glenn said. “Gob smacked!” Victor said, his jovial tone strained. He shot a rapid series of pictures that promptly ruined my night vision with the succession of strobe flashes. The glyphs crawled and the primeval visages yawned and leered. Dane must’ve seen it as well. “Stash that goddamned camera or I’m going to ram it where the sun don’t shine!”

Victor frowned and snapped the lens cap in place and in the midst of my visceral reaction to our circumstances, I wondered if this exchange was a window into their souls, and how much did Glenn know about *that*. I watched Glenn as he examined the idol and the pool. I felt a brief, searing contempt for his gawky frame, his mincing steps and too-skinny ass. I hung my head, ashamed, and also confused that something so petty and domestic would impinge upon the bizarre scene. For the hundredth time I considered the possibility my meninges were filling with blood like plastic sacks.

Up close, the basin was larger than I'd estimated, and rudely chiseled, as if it were simply a hollowed-out rock. Small squarish recesses were spaced at intervals around the rim, each encrusted with lichen and moss so they resembled mouths. Cold, green water dripped from the ceiling and filled the basin, its surface webbed with algae scum and fir needles and leaves. The attendant figurehead loomed, imposing bulk precariously inclined forward, giving the illusion that it gazed at us. I glanced at my companions, their faces eerily lighted by the reflection of the water.

… A horrible idea took root—that these men masked in blood, eyes gleaming with febrile intensity, had conned me, maneuvered me to this remote and profane location. They were magicians, descendants of the Salamanca Seven, necromancers of the secret grotto, Satan's disciples, who planned to slice my throat and conduct a black magic ritual to commune with their dear dead Tom, perhaps to raise him like Lazarus. Everything Glenn ever told me was a half truth, a mockery—Tom hadn't been the black sheep sidekick, oh no!, but rather the darksome leader, a sorcerer who'd initiated each of them into the foul cabal. Any moment now, Dane or my sweet beloved Glenn would reach into his pocket and draw the hunting knife sharpened just for my jugular, Victor's coil of rope would truss me, and then… Glenn touched my arm and I choked back a cry and everybody flinched. Their fear and concern appeared genuine. I allowed Glenn to comfort me, smiled weakly at his solicitous questions.

Victor said, "Boys, what now? I feel like calling CNN, the secretary of the interior. Somebody." Glenn rubbed his jaw. "Vicky, it's in the book, so apparently people are aware of this place. There's a burned-down village back thataway. That explorer, Pavlov, Magalov, whoever, named it after himself. People surely know."

"Just because it's in the book doesn't mean jack shit. How come there's no public record? I bet you my left nut this site isn't even on the government radar. Question is, why? How is that possible?"

I said, "An even better question is, do we want to screw around with the ineffable?" Victor sighed. "Oh, come on. You got the heebie-jeebies over some primitive art?"

“Take a closer look at the demon faces,” Dane said. “This is forces of darkness shit. Hardcore Iron Maiden album cover material.” He snorted and spat a lump of gory snot into the water. For a moment, we stood in shocked silence.

“If you want to flee, dears, say the word.” Victor laid the sarcasm on too thick to fool anybody. “Let’s march back to the land of beer, pizza, and long, hot showers.” He drew a cigarette and leaned against the basin to steady himself. The snick of his lighter, the bloom of flame, shifted the universe off its axis. He shuddered and dropped the lighter and stepped back far enough that I glimpsed a shivering cord the diameter of a blue ribbon leech extended from beneath the lip of the basin and plunge into the junction of his inner thigh and groin.

Greasy bubbles surfaced from the depths of the stagnant water, and burst, their odor more foul than the effluvium of the dead vines liquefying along the walls, and the scum dissolved to reveal a surface as clear as glass. The trough was a divining pool and the water a lens magnifying the slothful splay of the farthest cosmos where its gases and storms of dust lay like a veil upon the Outer Dark. A thumbnail-sized alabaster planetoid blazed beneath the ruptured skein of leaves and algae, a membranous cloud rising.

The cloud seethed and darkened, became black as a thunderhead. It keened —chains dragging against iron, a theremin dialed to eleven, a hypersonic shriek that somehow originated and emanated from inside my brain rather than an external source. Whispers drifted from the abyss, unsynchronized, unintelligible, yet conveying malevolent and obscene lust that radiated across the vast wastes of deep space. The cloud peeled, bloomed, and a hundred-thousand-miles-long tendril uncoiled, a proboscis telescoping from the central mass, and the whispers amplified in a burst of static. I went cold, warmth and energy drained from my body with such abruptness and violence, I staggered.

Glenn shouted and jerked my shoulder, and we tripped over each other. I saw Dane scrambling toward the entrance, and Victor frozen before the idol, face illuminated in the lurid radiance. His expression contorted and he gripped his skull in both hands, fingernails digging. The slimy cord drew taut and released from the muscle of his leg with a wet pop, left a bleeding circle in the fabric of his pants. Another of these appendages partially

spooled from the niche nearest me, writhing blindly as it sought to connect with warm meat.

The howl intensified. My vision distorted into streaks of white, resolving to the flickering vacuum of space where I floated near the rim of the Earth, and the moon slid as a black disk across the face of the sun.

12

Glenn cuffed and shook me awake. His cheeks were wet with tears. “You weren’t moving,” he said. I sat up and looked around. The unearthly light had faded to a dull glow, but I could make out some details of the chamber. Victor stood beside the idol, his back to us. He caressed the statue’s rotund belly, palm flat the way a man touches his wife’s stomach, feeling for the baby’s kick. Dane was nowhere to be seen.

I said, “Vicky? Vicky, you okay?” It required great effort to form the words. Victor slowly turned. Something was wrong with his face. Dried gore caked his forehead and temples. He grinned ghoulishly. “You should’ve seen what I saw. This isn’t a tomb… it’s…” He laughed and it gurgled in his throat. “They’ll be here soon, my sweets.”

Victor’s certitude, the lunacy in his expression, his tone, frightened me. “Glenn, we’ve got to get out of here.” I pushed away his arm and rose. “Vicky, come on. Let’s find your husband.”

“Where’s Dane going? He won’t leave me here, nor you, his best buddies. However, if he doesn’t come to his senses, if he’s run screaming for the hills, I’ll visit him soon enough. I’ll drag him home to the dark.”

“Vicky—” Glenn said. Victor mocked him. “Glenn! Be still, be at peace. They love you. You’ll see, you’ll see. Everything will change; you’ll be remade, turned inside out. We won’t need our skin, our teeth, our bones.” He licked his thumb and casually gouged his chest an inch above the nipple. Blood flowed, coursed over his rooting thumb and across the knuckles of his fist.

Glenn screamed. I glanced at the ground near my feet, hoping for a loose rock with which to brain Victor. Victor ripped loose a flap of skin and let it hang, revealing muscle. “We won’t need this, friends. Every quivering

nerve, every sinew will be laid bare." He leaned over and reached for the switchblade taped to his ankle. "Oh, shit," I said.

Glenn said shrilly, "What's that?" There was movement in the fissure. A figure manifested as a pale smudge against the background. It was naked and its skin glistened a pallid white like the soft meat of a grub. Its features were hidden by the gloom, and I was glad of that. Victor raised his arms and uttered a glottal exclamation.

The Man (it *was* a man, wasn't it?) crept forward to the very edge of the crevice, and hesitated there, apparently loath to emerge into the feeble light despite its palpable yearning to do so. Whether man or woman I couldn't actually determine as its wattles and pleats disguised its sex, but the figure's size and proportions were so large I couldn't imagine it being a woman. The weight of its hunger and lust echoed the empathic blast I'd received from the black cloud, and my mind itched as this damp, corpulent apparition whispered to me, tried to insinuate its thoughts into mine via a psychic frequency.

I beheld again the cloud, a dank cosmic mold seeping from galaxy to galaxy, a system of hollow planets and a brown dwarf star nested within its coils and cockles. Sunless seas of warm ichor sloshed with the gravitational spin of those hollow, lightless worlds, spoiled yolks within eggshells. Hosts of darksome inhabitants squirmed and joined in terrible communion. I felt unclean, violated in bearing witness to their coupling.

Beyond the entrance of the dolmen and the encircling trees, the sun burned cool and red. Soon it would be dusk… and then, and then… "Vicky! For the love of God, get over here." Victor ignored me and shuffled toward the figure, and the figure's luminous flesh darkened with a spreading, cancerous stain, like a piece of paper charring in a flame, or a sheet soaked in blood, and it reached, extending a hideously long arm. Its spindly fingers tapered to filthy, sharp points. Those fingers crooked, beckoning languidly. What did it promise Victor, with its whispers and wheedles?

I moved without thinking, for if I'd stopped to think I would've sprinted after Dane, who'd obviously exercised common sense in beating a retreat. I tackled Victor and slung him to the ground. The impact sent shocks through my wounded arm and I almost fainted again, but I hung tough and pinned

him. Stunned, he resisted ineffectually, flopped like a worm until I freed the pistol from my pocket and smacked him in the forehead with the butt. That worked just like the movies—his eyes rolled back and he went limp. Glenn came running and we grabbed Victor beneath the arms and dragged him from the chamber. The figure in the crevice laughed, a hyena drowning or a lunatic with a sliced throat.

The flight down the trail toward camp was harrowing. We bound Victor's hands with his own belt, and made a tourniquet to staunch the bleeding from his leg as it refused to clot, and half-carried him as he raved and shrieked—I finally pistol-whipped him again and he was quiet after that. The entire way, I glanced over my shoulder fully expecting the dreadful presence to overtake us. Hysteria galvanized me into forty minutes of superhuman exertion—had Glenn not been there, I'm sure I could've easily hoisted Victor onto my shoulders and made like a track star.

Dane jumped from the bushes near the main road and Glenn nearly lopped his head with a hatchet. Dane had run to the camp before his panic subsided and he'd mustered the courage to double back and find us. His shame was soon replaced by horror at Victor's condition, which neither I nor Glenn could fully explain. I convinced Dane there wasn't time to talk lest someone or something had followed us from the dolmen. So, the three of us lugged Victor to camp, loaded the Land Rover and got the hell off Mystery Mountain.

13

I put the pedal to the metal and Glenn made the calls as we hurtled down the logging road in the dark. The authorities were waiting at the campgrounds. Victor recovered from his stupor as they strapped him to a gurney. He cursed and snarled and thrashed until the paramedics tranquilized him. Dane, Glenn, and I were escorted to the local sheriff's office where the uniforms asked a lot of questions.

The smartest move would've been to fudge the details. That's the movies, though. None of us were coherent enough to concoct a cover story to logically explain the hole in Victor's leg, or the monster, or the bad acid trip phantasmagoria of the pool. We just spilled the tale, drew an X on a

topographical map and invited the sheriff and his boys to go see for themselves. It didn't help our credibility that the cops found Victor's weed stash and several hundred empty beer cans in the truck.

Ultimately, they let us walk. The fight at the tavern wasn't mentioned, despite our mashed faces and missing teeth, which surprised the hell out of me. Victor's wound was presumed an accident; the investigators decided he harpooned himself on a branch while drunkenly wandering the mountainside. Personally, I preferred that version as well—the reality was too horrible. Victor's deranged state was obviously a hysterical reaction to the near-death incident. Our statements were taken and we were shown the door. Once the cops put two and two together that the four of us were queer, they couldn't end the conversation fast enough. Someone would be in touch, thank you for your cooperation, etcetera, etcetera.

Dane went to stay with Victor at Harborview Hospital while Glenn and I returned home. Neither of us was in any shape to linger by Victor's bedside. I'd tried to talk Dane into crashing at the house, to no avail—he hadn't even acknowledged the offer. His face was blank and prematurely lined. I'd seen refugees from shelled villages wearing the exact same look. In his own way, he was as removed from reality as Victor.

Glenn fared a little better—he was a wreck too, but we had each other. I dreaded his reaction when the shock dissipated and the magnitude of the tragedy sank in. He'd lost one friend, possibly forever, and the jury was out on the other. God help me, a bit of my heart savored the notion I finally had him all to myself. Another, even more bitter and shriveled bit slightly gloated over the fact it was finally his turn to suffer. I'd done all the crying in our relationship.

Daulton meowed when we came in and turned on the lights. The house, our comfy furniture and family pictures, all of it, seemed artificial, props from someone else's life. I showered for the first time in several days, spent an hour with my forehead pressed against the stall tiles. I saw the wound in Victor's leg, his mouth chanting soundlessly, saw the stars thicken into a stream that poured into that black hole. The black hole, the black cloud, was limned in red and it made me think of the broken circle on the cover of *Moderor de Caliginis.* These images were not exact, not perfectly

symmetrical, and the hot water cascading over my back no longer thawed me. My teeth chattered.

I wrapped myself in one of the luxuriously thick towels we'd gotten for a mutual anniversary gift and limped into the hall and found Glenn on hands and knees, his ear pressed to the vent. "What the hell?" I said. He gestured awkwardly over his shoulder for quiet. After a few moments he rose and dusted his pajamas with a half-dozen brisk pats. "I thought the TV was on downstairs. It's not. Must've been sound traveling along the pipes from the neighbors, or I dunno. Let's hit the rack, huh?"

I lay in bed, chilled and shaking, Glenn a dead lump next to me. The accent lamp in the hall gave a warm, albeit fragile yellow light. Without shifting to face me like he normally would've, Glenn said, "Tommy fell into a hole in the woods. That's how he really died." I said, "Yeah. Vicky told me. You fucker." Glenn still didn't move. I couldn't recall him ever being so still. He said, "I figured that's why you've been so bent. Then you know why we kept quiet."

"No, I don't."

The light flickered and now Glenn's head turned. "True. You don't. I apologize. I should've come clean long ago. Tommy was so deep into black magic it blew my mind when I finally caught on. He always sneered at the lightweight stuff me and Dane fooled with. I really believed he was just a redneck who made good. Then we hit some extra heavy-duty acid one night and he bared his soul. We were on spring break and spending a weekend in the Mojave with some of the guys and he got to rambling. His parents were basically illiterate, but he had well-to-do relatives on his mom's side. Scholars. He lived a few summers with them and they turned him on to very, very dark occultism. Tommy intimated he'd taken part in a human sacrifice. He lied to impress me, I'm sure."

I wasn't sure. "What did they do? The relatives."

"His uncle was a professor. World traveler who went native. Hear Tommy tell it, the old dude was a connoisseur of the black arts, but specialized in blood rituals and necromancy. Tommy said the man could… conjure things. Dr. Faustus style."

“I might’ve laughed at that the other day,” I said. The lamp flickered again and shadows raced across the wall. Glenn said, “Tommy showed me some moldy manuscript pages he carried in his pocket. They were wrinkled and obviously torn from a book. The words were written in Latin—he actually read Latin! He wouldn’t say what they meant, but he consulted them later when we went on our trip into the Black Hills near Olympia. Looking back, I get the feeling maybe he had his own *Black Guide*.”

“It could’ve been a possum stew recipe from his grandma’s cookbook,” I said. “The motherfucker didn’t come visit me in the night. I dreamed that when I was rocked off my ass. The guide, well there’s a coincidence. I’m not going to buy a conspiracy theory about how dead Tom made sure we found it at ye old knickknack shop. I sure as fuck ain’t going to worry my pretty head over what we saw on the mountain. I’m sorry for Vicky and Dane. We’re okay, though and I say let sleeping dogs lie.” I breathed heavily and stared at the hall lamp so hard my eyes hurt.

“Ignoring those sleeping dogs is what got us here. Tommy talked and talked that enchanted evening, had a scary expression as he watched me. His eyes were so strange. I got paranoid thinking he wasn’t really high, that this was a test. Or a trap. I remember him saying there was ‘sure as God made little green apples’ life out there. He pointed at the stars. Cold night in the desert and those stars were right on top of us in their billions. He wanted to meet *them,* except he was afraid. His uncle warned him the only thing an advanced species would want from us would be our meat and bones.”

Glenn didn’t say anything for a while. He rubbed my arm, which still ached fiercely. Finally, he said, “Everything returned to normal after the Mojave trip—he didn’t mention our chat, didn’t seem to recall letting me in on his secret life. A few months later it was summer vacation and we were knocking around Seattle. I came home to visit my folks and the others tagged along. Tommy put together an overnight hike and away we went. I saw him fall into the hole as we were walking way up in the hills along a well-beaten path. Mountain bikers used it a lot, even though it’s a remote spot. Dane and Victor were joking around and I glanced over my shoulder exactly as Tommy fell. I didn’t tell those two what I saw. I made a show of yelling for him until Dane found the sinkhole. Course we called in the troops. I’m sure Vicky told you what happened next. Cops, Fish and

Wildlife, everybody we could think of. No luck. That pit just dropped into the center of the Earth and it was impossible to help him. To this day nobody but me is completely sure that's where Tommy disappeared—it just makes the most sense. Him tripping into a bottomless pit is awful, yeah. Not as awful as other possibilities, though."

The lamp clicked off and on three times and I raised myself against the headboard and clutched the coverlet to my chin. I lost interest in finally getting to the bottom of Tommy's death and the weird conspiracy to sanitize its circumstances. "Holy shit—Glenn, please stop. I've got a bad feeling." I had a sense of impending doom, in fact. I could easily envision a colossal meteor descending from on high and smashing the house to bits. Daulton fluffed into a ball of bristling fur and scooted under the bed where he hissed and growled.

Glenn kept rubbing my arm and the light flickered again and again, and the filament ticked like a rattler. "I never told the guys what I really saw that day. Tommy didn't fall. He was snatched by a hand… not a hand that belonged to any regular person I've seen. An arm, fish belly white, shot up and caught his belt and yanked him in… and the hand had… claws. He didn't even scream. He didn't make a peep. It happened so fast I thought it couldn't be real. I dreamed it like you dreamed Tommy was in the living room after the party."

"I can't believe this shit," I said. What had Tommy expected to find in the Black Hills? Another ancient ruin hidden from all but the initiated and the doomed? I was getting colder. I wanted to ask Glenn if he still loved Tommy. Nothing he said would've mattered and so I comforted myself with smoldering resentment.

"When we were in the dolmen, did you get a look at that guy's face?" he said.

"The dude in the crevice? That freaky inbred motherfucker who got separated from all his Ozarks kin? No."

"I did," Glenn said. "It was *him*."

The light went off and stayed off.

I woke with a dry mouth. Glenn's covers were thrown back and his side of the sheets were cool. I listened to the creaks of the house. The power was out. Glenn laughed, downstairs. He said something unintelligible. In my semiconscious state, I assumed he'd called the power company and was sharing a joke with the poor sap manning the phone center.

Fuzzy-headed, I put on my robe and negotiated the hall and the stairs. A bit of starlight and the tip of the crescent moon gleamed through the windows. Glenn had lighted a candle in the kitchen and it led me through the haunted woods to the doorway. It was only a single candle, a fat one I'd bought at a bookstore for my office but stuck in a kitchen drawer for emergencies instead, and so the room remained mostly in gloom.

She slouched at the opposite end of the dining table. She was naked and lush and repellently white. Her hair was long and thick and black. Her hands rested on the table, and her fingers and cracked, sharp nails were far too long and thin. *Moderor de Caliginis* lay open before her. She lazily riffled pages and smiled at me. I couldn't see her teeth.

Glenn stood to her left in the breakfast nook, the toes of his slippers in the light, his shape otherwise indistinct. He waited mutely. "Who are you?" I said to her, although I already knew. The covetous way she handled the guide made it clear. "Three guesses," she said in a perfectly normal, good-humored tone. "Rose, I presume," I said, voice cracking and ruining my attempt at bravado. "How kind of you to drop in." The gun was in my coat in the living room. I thought I might make it if I ran and if I didn't trip over anything.

"How kind of *you* to open your home. Thank you for the lovely note. Yes, I had a fabulous visit to the Peninsula—and points beyond. That saying, *a nice place to visit.*… Well, I liked it so much, I decided to naturalize."

"Glenn," I said. I was exhausted. It came over me in a wave—the seasick feeling of giving way too much blood at the nurse's station. I resisted a sudden compulsion to collapse into a chair and lay my head on the table. My fingers and toes tingled. I gripped the doorframe for balance. "Glenn," I tried again, weak, hopeless. Glenn said nothing.

"He's not for you. He belongs to Tommy," Rose said. "He belongs to us. We love him. You were never part of their inner circle, were you Willem?

Second best for Glenn. His vanilla life after graduation into the real world of jobs, bills, routine sex. No thrills, not like college." She closed the book and traced the broken ring on its cover. "Alas, nice guys do indeed finish last. I, however, believe in second chances and do-overs. Would you like a do-over, Willem? You'll need to decide whether to come along with us and see the sights. Or not. You are more than welcome to join the fun. Goodness knows, I hope you do. Tommy does too."

The cellar door had swung open while I was distracted. Rose stood and took Glenn's hand. They passed over the threshold. He turned and stared at me. Behind him was infinite blackness. Her arms, pale as death, emerged from that blackness and draped his shoulders. She caressed him. She whispered in his ear, and in mine.

The pull was ineluctable; I released the doorframe and crossed the room in slow, tottering steps like a man wading into high tide. The universe whirled and roared. I came within kissing distance of my love and looked deep into his dull, wet eyes, gazed into the bottomless pit. His face was inert but for the eyes. Maybe that was really him waiting somewhere down there in the dark.

"Oh, honey," I said, and stepped back and shut the door.

15

I sold the house and moved across the country. For nearly a decade, I've lived on a farm in Kingston, New York, with an artist who welds bed frames and puts them on display in galleries. We share the property with a couple of nanny goats, some chickens, two dogs and Daulton. I write my culture essays, although Burt makes enough neither of us needs a real job. Repairing the fences in the field, patching the shed roof and making the odd repairs around the house keep me occupied, keep me from chewing my nails. Nothing can help me as I lie awake at night, unfortunately. That's when I do the real damage to myself. Against my better judgment I mailed the *Black Guide* to Professor Berman, though I cursed him for a fool during our last email exchange.

Victor's confined to an asylum and his doctor contacts me on occasion, hoping I'll reveal what "massive trauma" befell his patient to precipitate his

catastrophic break from reality. From what I gather, Victor keeps journals—dozens of them. He's got a yen for astronomy and physics and at least one scientist thinks he's a savant. Dane disappeared three years after our fateful trip and hasn't resurfaced. His credit cards and bank accounts remain untouched. The cops asked me about this, too. I really don't know, and I don't want to, either.

Burt raised his eyebrows when I bought the .12 gauge shotgun a few months back and parked it by my side of the bed. I told him it was for varmints and he accepted that. There are cougars and bears and coyotes lurking in the nearby forest. He hasn't a clue that when he's away on his infrequent art show trips, I sit in our homey kitchen by the light of a kerosene lamp with the gun on the table and watch the small door leading into the cellar. The door is bolted, not that I'm convinced it matters. It began a few weeks ago and only happens when Burt's out of town. He's not a part of this, thank God for small favors. The dogs used to lie at my feet and whine. Lately, the normally loyal pair won't come into the room after dark, and I don't blame them.

Burt's in the city for the weekend. He's mixing with the royalty and pining for home, has said as much in no less than a half-dozen phone messages. I sit here in the gathered gloom, with a bottle of scotch, a glass, and a loaded gun. Really, it's pointless. I sip scotch and wait for the soft, insistent knocks against the cellar door, for Glenn to whisper that he loves me. Guilt and loneliness have worked like acid on my insides. God help me, but more and more, I'm tempted to rack the slide and eject the shells, send them spinning across the floor. I'm tempted to leave the deadbolt unlocked. Then see what happens next.

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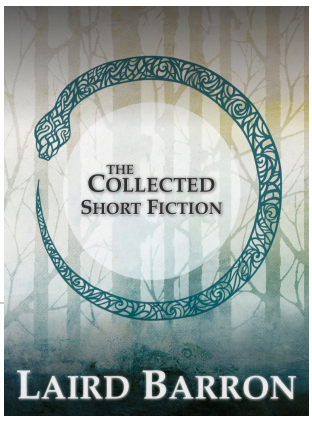

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…Over the course of the long afternoon of thunderclaps and rain squalls they had unpacked most of the living room of the ancestral home.

He stared into a box at his feet for a long while.

She put on a Sinatra record.

The wind slackened and left in its stead a charged stillness that accentuated the remoteness of the house, the artificiality of the music.

Out of the blue he said, —Pop used to play this game with me and Karl when we were kids. He called it *Something Scary.* His voice was hushed like a soap actor emoting as he reveals a deep, dark secret to his love interest.

She set aside the silver and blue vase that contained some of her mother's ashes and watched him in the mirror over the fireplace. —Uh, oh, she said.

He chuckled, still regarding the contents of the box which was labeled "misc" in bold magic marker strokes. It was not one of the boxes unloaded by the movers, rather a venerable, dusty container he'd retrieved from the attic. —Yeah, uh-oh, but not in an inappropriate touch, danger zone, bathing suit area way, or anything.

—Am I relieved?

—Maybe, maybe not, he said.

She heard a noise, a cough or a growl, off to the left in the deeper shadows, but saw nothing unusual when she glanced that direction.

The house was a source of many unexplained noises.

What if there were rats in the walls? Thank God for the cat.

Pine floorboards gleamed in the light of the lamps near the arched door that let into a drawing room, then a library full of moldering books. She'd dusted a few off and found their foreign titles illegible, spines so withered and decayed she dared not handle them lest they disintegrate.

Everything else that had defined the house as the demesne of his parents was tidily stowed away. His brother and sister, aunts and uncles, had swept through and claimed everything that wasn't nailed down.

So, a blank slate for the happy couple.

There were several multi-paned windows along the far wall of the living room. Like the rest of the house the windows were old and quaint and to her mind, vaguely ominous; portals to a dimmer, less hospitable era.

It was well past sundown and the glass was dark as steel.

The forest across the country lane was far older than the house and it reinforced the darkness that pressed against the windows.

There were bears and deer in the woods; and coyotes and cougars and snakes.

Earlier that day she'd brushed a large black spider from its nest in the porch eave with a long-handled broom left in the pantry. The broom handle was worn smooth as glass and it bowed in the middle; its bristles were rocky nubs, blackened.

She thought about the woods and how someone or something could even now be lurking out there, spying on her, and imagined hoarse breathing, hot on her neck.

Drapes would certainly be the first order of business tomorrow.

An exterminator would soon follow.

She said, —I'm going to see what we have for dinner, and walked through a second arch into a hallway.

The hallway led her to the farm-style kitchen with low beams and dangling meat hooks that framed a long, scarred wooden table in shadow.

The table had seated farmers and patricians alike for the house's foundation predated the arrival of her husband's kin by a decade or more.

A gas range with double ovens squatted opposite a cold hearth.

A cast iron pot hung from a hook at the center of the hearth.

The pot was corroded with rust.

She heated a kettle of water for pasta and grabbed some shrimp from the stainless steel fridge, the only concession to modern convenience in the room.

He materialized in the doorway.

For a moment his features were occulted by the gloom. He could've been *anyone* standing there, and her skin prickled.

Then he emerged into the light and kissed her and fetched the cheese he'd bought in the township and poured the wine he'd also bought in the township.

They sat together at the table and ate pasta and drank wine while Sinatra continued to sing, his voice ethereal as it stretched across time and space and echoed through the empty rooms.

Something panted under her chair, near her ankle.

The vent shushed to life as the furnace powered on in the cellar and a cool draft swirled around her open toe sandals.

—Jesus Mary, she said, and gulped her wine.

Their black cat, Elvira, scuttled from between her ankles and bolted into the hall.

He whistled and tipped his chair back and studied the timbers above the table, the cold, iron hooks. —I know, he said. —I know. Let's get a dog to keep her company.

—Elvira probably doesn't want that kind of company.

—I'm thinking of you taking one of your leisurely nature strolls. The woods are full of vermin.

—The house is full of vermin.

The house didn't have a name although it was large enough to warrant one. Four generations of his family had dwelt here. His childhood bedroom was on the third floor, sealed tight as a drum.

Gone for twenty years, he wouldn't have returned, but his parents were suddenly dead, victims of a helicopter accident while on vacation in

Colorado.

Now everything was his, whether he wanted it or not.

The will made it plain, much to the consternation of his immediate and extended family who'd thrived upon petty grievances and longstanding feuds, each secure in his or her place within the pecking order.

No more efficiency flat in the city.

The commute to the station was thirty-five minutes through somber pastoral vistas, then another hour by train to his uptown office. Meanwhile, she would work from home; she could work anywhere her computer plugged into a wall.

Yet, she disliked the place, loathed the idea of inhabiting its haunted rooms for days and weeks and months of the years to come.

And the encroaching wilderness…

Money was tight and it was for the best. Maybe there would be a tragic fire and an insurance settlement. Hope sprang eternal, indeed.

—We'll go look at puppies at the shelter on Saturday. How's that sound?

—Why would your father want to frighten you? she said, not wishing to discuss the ordeal of visiting a dog shelter. Animal shelters and hospitals depressed her. She couldn't watch the scene at the pound in *Lady and the Tramp* for fear of bawling.

—He was a card, he said.

She poured another glass of wine, leaving the dregs.

She'd met his father twice.

Once at an Easter dinner, again at the wedding.

A lean man with a lean face and hair as pale and thin as straw. He'd kissed her hand and said charming things. She feared him instantly.

—But why screw with your head? Kinda psychotic.

—Isn't that how fathers get their kicks? He rose and went to the cabinet and brought forth another bottle of wine she'd no idea was there. He popped the cork and filled his glass.

He didn’t return to the table, but shoved his hip against the counter and held the glass tight to the breast of his jacket.

His tie hung loose and sloppy. —Pop was a big Ingmar Bergman fan. *Hour of the Wolf* was his favorite. A sucker for those austere, Baltic landscapes. The cruel beauty of it all. He romanticized isolation and eccentricity. He fantasized about doing in his enemies in the name of art.

—You too are a raging Bergman fan, she said.

—And so now you see I come by it honestly. Pop raised us to be good little Yanks, but he was always a Swede, through and through, just like Grandpa. And a film lover. He met Max Von Sydow in New York at a party. Before I was born.

—Weren’t you four or five?

He frowned and ran the rim of the glass over his lip. —Was I?

—Yeah, because Karl was in first grade and the two of you were hiding out under the table with the punchbowl. You stayed up all night and everybody got drunk and nobody missed you. You’ve told it to me. If your father loved Sweden so much, why didn’t he repatriate? She’d never asked before and he’d never volunteered a rationale. His strained familial ties were well documented and not a subject to broach lightly.

He smiled a smile that wasn’t real. —What, and give up all of this? My great-great grandfather rowed us to America. You can never go home.

—Right. All this. She was sufficiently buzzed to ignore the warning in the fake smile and feel pleased in the doing.

Her husband was so insufferably unflappable, it was fun to needle him on occasion, and no better occasion than on the eve of their occupation of a rambling, patriarchal tomb he’d dragged her to, willy-nilly.

—My family is *persona non grata*. It is impossible for us to return, ever. He smiled again, a sharp, feral baring of his teeth. —Pop got Von Sydow’s autograph on a cocktail napkin. Locked it in his writing desk. I hunted for it the other day… He trailed off, lips pursed, eyes narrowed.

She swallowed more wine and stared with morbid fascination at her reflection as it warped in the window.

Quite odd, his use of the word *hunted.* Not *looked* or *searched*, but *hunted.* How peculiarly specific of him.

She wondered if he could sense her thoughts and had decided to play *Something Scary*, whatever that might be, with *her.* —Were you planning to sell it on Ebay, or what?

—Baby doll is drunk. How can I tell? She's getting bitchy.

—Bitchier, you mean. I'm only half in the bag.

—No, sweet pea, I don't intend to hock Pop's effing keepsake. He played with his tie loop, snaring his fingers and twisting. —I was going through his stuff. Memories from when me and Karl were kids came rushing in. I haven't thought of that party for ages. Dunno why it hit me. Being here is stirring a lot of muck, I guess. He chuckled unhappily.

He resembled his father as his father had appeared a decade ago, except his hair was thick and his eyes were kind.

Perhaps not kind tonight, tonight they were mysterious.

He acted like he'd been drinking heavily when she knew that this wasn't the case. Her man could hold his liquor, and hers as well. —The time has come, I fear, to speak of cabbages and kings.

—You're so cute when you're earnest, she said.

—Don't you fucking mock me.

She said, —All right, I'm sorry. Tell me more about your faddah.

His neck reddened, flushing as dark as the wine in his glass.

The record skipped, making a garbled, demonic wreck of Old Blue Eyes' voice as if someone were dragging the needle back and forth across the vinyl.

Six times, then it abruptly stopped and the house was silent.

They remained very still, heads turned toward the doorway.

She felt sick, right on the edge of spontaneous diarrhea.

Finally, he set his glass on the counter and walked out of the kitchen.

His footsteps faded.

She waited, not realizing she'd held her breath until her temples throbbed.

He called from the living room, —Damned cat. What do you want to listen to?

—Something upbeat.

—Like what?

She visualized the pile of records by the record player. —I don’t know. Put on the Abba.

—Abba. I don’t see it.

—It’s there. Probably under The Village People.

He cursed. —Okay, looking. A minute later Billy Joel began to sing “Movin’ Out.” A minute after that, he reappeared and walked over to his wine and drank it all in a single steady draught, which was unlike him, he being a consummate wine snob. One didn’t gulp wine unless one was a boor. He refilled his glass. —No Abba today. The defiance in his tone sounded playful, except she knew better.

—Why do you hate Abba so much?

—Truly, I hate Abba with a pure white hot passion. So did Pop.

—Shit, isn’t that ironic. The drummer died a couple of years ago. Brunkert. He tripped into a glass door. The glass shattered and cut his neck. He wrapped a towel around his neck and went for a neighbor’s house. Died in the yard. Tragic.

—Not tragic.

—That’s cold, honeybunch.

—The drummer in the famous bands always gets offed. That’s part of the pact with the Devil. Somebody’s got to take one for the team.

—Tell it to Ringo. Down to him and Paul, unless Paul’s dead for real.

—Ringo is a special case. Best got the hook, then Satan traded up for Lennon. Exception that proves the rule.

—I’ve got nothing, she said. —Even now, in the gloaming of our lives, every day I discover a new facet of your personality.

He rolled his eyes and poured more wine. He nodded toward the ceiling. —Did you notice the door to my old bedroom is nailed shut?

—I thought it was locked.

—Uh-uh. No latch on the door. Pop nailed it shut. With spikes. Who does that?

—He was hinting that you were dead to him.

—The bastard wouldn’t let go that easily. He liked to think his claws were in deep, that me and Karl would come crawling back to him one day. He took the long view. This is something else.

—You don’t mention your sister.

—Honey bunny, I don’t mention my *family*, if you hadn’t noticed. Thus the confessional.

—Yeah, but you don’t mention her with a vengeance.

—Would you feel better if I did?

—She’s nice. I like her. Elvira likes her.

—When the hell was Carling at our place? His eyes bulged slightly.

—Lots of times. She came over for tea or we’d go have lunch. I did her hair. She did mine. Billy Joel sang “Stranger,” and the part about the masks made her shiver.

—She’s not as nice as you think. I don’t want her coming around here.

—What do you mean, not as nice as I think? I’m not simple. I didn’t fly off a turnip truck.

—I mean she’s good at fooling people. Better than Pop. She’s all teeth. Beware, beware!

—Does she take after your mother?

—She takes after Pop. Mother wasn’t anything like either of them. Too bad she was so beaten down when you met her. Mom used to argue with him like cats and dogs. He broke her eventually. By the time I graduated she just sat around knitting. His opinions were her opinions. Mom survived breast cancer. Too bad, really. What did Carling want, anyway?

—Company. You won’t talk to her. Karl won’t talk to her. Neither you nor Karl talk to one another. None of you talked to your parents. Carling is sad. I think she’s holding out hope there’ll be a family reunion of sorts.

—Ha! I hope she liked the funeral, because that's the last reunion she's gonna get for a while. Trust me when I say, don't trust her. She's a witch. She even collaborated with Pop when he played *Something Scary.* I'm convinced she helped him drive Mom over the edge. She was a daddy's girl, all right.

—What did she do?

—What do you mean, what did she do? She's a monster, a witch. Pulls the wings off flies, torments kittens. Worse than that.

—I did not notice these qualities. Does Karl feel the same?

—Hell yes. He hates her worse than I do. He tried to kill her when we were in middle school. Pushed her off the balcony on the second floor. She fell into the rose bushes and thus his assassination attempt was foiled by the gods.

—I'm sure Karl wasn't really trying to kill her.

—Oh, yes, yes he was. He put rat poison in her lemonade. She didn't drink it, though. Once, and I can't swear it's true, when they were on spring break, he slipped her a roofie and left her in Daytona with a local biker gang. There's real sex on the beach for you. I wouldn't leave them in a locked room.

—Remind me to spit on your brother the next time I see him. Unless he's on fire… unless you're lying.

—I'm lying about the poison and the bikers. Karl did shove her fat ass over the balcony. You wonder why none of us talk, now you know. Both of them suck in their own special way. Childhood was survival. I kept my head down and put one foot in front of another. I bled my folks for an education, then I beat feet and never looked back. I *did* find something weird in Pop's study, by the way.

—Oh?

—Yeah. A black robe hanging from a hook in the closet. Only thing in there.

—Like a magistrate's robe?

—You know that's not the kind. I guess it's not weird so much that he owned the robe, but that nobody packed it away or locked it up. Not a speck

of dust on it either. Could've easily just been returned from the dry cleaner.

—I'm cold, she said. —Let's start a fire and knock the damp off this joint.

They adjourned to the living room. She arranged the plush pseudo-leather divan near the fireplace and fetched a quilt from their bedroom on the second floor—a very large guest room, actually. She wasn't ready to set up shop in the master bedroom. The bad vibes were overpowering. Surprisingly, he acceded to her decision without comment. Maybe he had the creeps too.

He brought wood in from the shed that abutted the fence at the far end of the yard, stamping a muddy trail across the floor. He got a fire cracking and spitting and she began to feel cozy. She slipped off her sandals and stretched across the divan and watched him clump around, fussing with the pokers and jostling the flaming logs, adjusting the screens, until he finally sat on the couch, one ankle braced on a settee. Red and gold and orange light flickered through the grate and made a shifting, crystalline pattern on the planks, raced along the wall and shimmered and swirled in the nearest window. The light-play reminded her of magic lanterns from the eighteenth century, casting fairytale monsters and vistas of haunted forests and mountains across the walls and ceilings of peasant cottages late, late in the lonesome night.

—Now, she said. —give on this *Something Scary*.

—Funny you should mention magic lanterns. My dearly departed father was obsessed with them and there is one in that box yonder, along with a handful of color plates he collected from antiquarians around the globe. A handful were made by Eadweard Muybridge, the guy who invented motion pictures. Crazy, murderous bastard who filmed horses and buffaloes and such. He also did a series with naked people performing menial tasks. But I've only seen the other plates, the ones with fake monsters and demons. There are frightful things on those plates.

—I didn't mention magic lanterns, she said, drawing the quilt closer to her chin.

He smiled. —You muse aloud, sugarplum. You also talk in your sleep. It's curious that you brought up Satan. Pop's obsession with the Prince of Darkness rivals his Bergman fetish. There's some outlawed tomes in the

library and a case of knives and ritual masks and black candles around here somewhere. Carling might've taken them. Big sister knows what to do with sacrificial daggers. Yeah, I just bet she had her eye on poor Elvira. Word to the wise, she shows her face on our doorstep you better send her packing.

—But I didn't mention Satan, either. You did.

—You started in with the drummer business. One thing led to another. Know what Pop said to me one night when he crawled from under my bed? It was pitch black, but I recognized his breath as he crouched over me. He whispered, *Lucky you can't see me like this, kiddo. Me and your sister are out of our faces.* Carling grabbed my foot. Her hand was ice cold. I pissed myself.

—I… faces? She didn't quite grasp this shift in her reality and the buzz from the alcohol wasn't helping. His matter of fact revelation unnerved and confused her.

—You're shitting me, right? Your dad wasn't a satanist. Carling? How could you not tell me?

—I'm deadly serious, love. This isn't the kind of thing one brings up on first date…

—How about on the hundredth, the thousandth? How about before moving us to the Overlook Hotel?

—…and then I decided I was hot for you and the urge to spill my guts sort of faded away. You're a good thing, baby. I didn't want to lose you.

—The honeymoon is over. So here comes the dirty laundry.

—I didn't anticipate inheriting the house. I figured at best Pop would carve it to pieces and dole it out like that. We'd each get a check. But here we are and the lies will surely come to light. There's power here.

—So, let's sell. You should hate this house. I mean, I thought you loved it before you dropped the bombshell that your family is full of psychos. My God, I thought it was plain old garden variety sibling rivalry and resentment of being the youngest heir. My god, my god.

—Yes, I should hate it, and I do. Unfortunately, I can't sell.

—Why not? Far as I'm concerned, we can offload this pile of wood for below market value and lease a condo.

—You don’t get it. I literally can’t sell. Believe me, putting this on the market was on my to-do list. Every time I dial the realtor, a spike of pain stabs me between the eyes. I vomited in the office last week. Then comes these… I’d call them nightmares, except they’re closer to prophetic visions. Somebody who resembles my dad tying me to the bed and cutting out my heart. I’m ten or eleven and he says I’m promised to the Devil, that I can never leave, and starts hacking. Baby, it’s so real I wake shrieking.

—I haven’t heard you shrieking. You don’t even snore.

—That’s because it doesn’t make a sound, doesn’t escape my mouth. My face is sort of paralyzed. Or I dunno what. I’m cursed. This place is mine and I can’t leave… who knows what will happen if I really, really try.

—There’s a condition. A night terror where you feel like someone is sitting on your chest. You can’t move, can’t scream.

—I think it’s Pop’s ghost. Turning the screws.

She thought about this for a while, or tried to. Her mind jumped from point to point, conjuring a panoply of bloody sacrifice, murderous relatives, and Satan laughing from a bed of fire. She didn’t bother arguing that while his father might’ve been a lunatic, it would take an even bigger nut to entertain the notion of a family curse. Mind over matter. If his father had truly dominated him as a child, then that control might persist on a subconscious level. She pictured an EC Comics panel of a putrefying claw reaching for her husband from beyond the grave. She giggled, mildly embarrassed at the shrillness of her outburst.

—Sure, laugh.

—Forgive me. Carling should’ve inherited. She’s the eldest. Why you?

—Excellent question and one that I put to Karl when we met with the executor. He still talked to Pop on the rare occasion and I hoped he might have some insight. Little brother was cagey. It’s been two months since the reading of the will. I’ve called Karl every other day, left him a dozen messages. He’s gone.

—Gone on vacation?

—Gone as in vapor. I filed a police report.

—And this is another thing you decided not to tell me?

—We’re a secretive bunch, my clan. The cops say he’s around, but won’t say where. I think they’re wrong. Or lying. Something happened when that helicopter crashed and my father got turned into hamburger. I feel strange. Physically, emotionally. Don’t even try to suggest it’s grief.

—The police aren’t going to lie. That’s tinfoil hat jibber-jabber, man. He skipped town after the funeral, probably to blow the wad he nabbed. Your parents left him fifty grand. Not too shabby. Coke and hookers would keep him busy for a while, especially if he went to someplace with a depressed economy. Mexico, Costa Rica, Haiti, one of those places where Main Street is all whitewashed façades and discos, and one block over everybody’s living under corrugated tin roofs and pissing in buckets.

He didn’t say anything. Firelight moved across his face and she had a bad moment where he resembled his father so much her stomach turned over. He rose and went to the “misc” box and rummaged and brought forth a selection of wooden sticks that telescoped into a tripod. Next, he unwrapped a bulky metal contraption with gears and lenses and a small hand crank. He set the metal gadget on the tripod and pointed its central aperture at a blank section of the wall, a pale block where a cabinet had rested until recently. —Behold my father’s favorite toy in the whole wide world. He used this to put on phantasmagoria performances for the kids.

—Phantasmagoria?

—A horror show. Very popular with the Victorian set. You’ll see. He switched off the lamp and shut the panels in the fireplace so the glow became dim. He made adjustments to the magic lantern and vigorously cranked the handle like he was winding a jack in the box. Lastly, he inserted the edge of an object that resembled a film reel into the side of the box. He said, —A rudimentary model appeared in Europe during the fifteen hundreds. This one was built by a Viennese clockmaker in 1930 and is exponentially more sophisticated than its predecessors. The clockmaker was an occultist who cherished Chivalric and Renaissance theatrical traditions. He built several dozen variations on this design and they were purchased by wealthy collectors such as Pop.

—Is this the game?

—The game has a lot of components. This worked on us when we were tykes, less so later. *Voila!* A switch snapped into place and a yellow light came on in the guts of the machine and magnified through the apertures into a series of ovals on the wall. The ovals gradually brightened and ran together with a jittery, liquid quality like cells combining under a microscope. Black-trunked trees unfolded from the shimmering edges of the imagery and spread talons. The canopy intertwined and creepers slithered forth in a primitive Claymation effect, off-kilter and mesmerizing, and bubbles of swamp gas floated and sputtered among the branches, and the light brightened and dimmed, surging, retreating as branches became snakes and knotholes glittered like eyeballs and slowly widening mouths, oozing sap and slime.

—Wow, she said. —That's amazing.

—Shh, he said.

Figures, distorted by the shuddering frames, skulked between the boles of the trees, capered as the light downshifted to red, then black, and when the panel brightened, beneath a conical hat a white, lunatic face with strips of flesh peeled to chipped bone leered at her, twisting a stork neck to get a better view. She screamed even as the ghoulish visage rippled and morphed into a hillock amidst a sea of long grass beneath a too-full moon. More figures loped and gamboled toward the foreground; tall, yet stooped, garbed in cowls and robes, sinewy arms raised in an apish manner. The oval fractured and the pictures multiplied and flowed up the walls, rippled across the floor, warped as they passed through curtains and furniture. The room fell away, its wood and stone dissolving, leaving her on cushion floating in undefined space. Vertigo stunned her. A scabrous hand clawed at her and she screamed again and toppled backward. She covered her eyes and lay sobbing until he touched her arm and stroked her hair. He said, —I'd forgotten. I'm sorry. It's safe to look. She peeked through her fingers. The magic lantern still whirred and clicked and projected grainy, diffuse blob of light. The ghouls and specters had receded into the undulating murk. He kissed her forehead. —Pop would set that rig in my room and commence playing. If I shut my eyes, he'd slap me with his belt. If I screamed, I'd get the belt. I got the belt a lot. There are four hundred plates in that box. See what I mean? See what I was dealing with?

—Shut it off.

—It’s off.

—All the way off. Do it, or I’m going to get a hammer and smash that Goddamned thing into a billion Goddamned pieces.

—Easy, the spring has to unwind. I put the dropcloth over it.

She wiped her eyes and sat on the couch. —What the hell was that?

—A phantasmagoria, like I said. It’s called *Lepers of the Black Wood.* Made by a guy in Snoqualmie around 1890. He probably enjoyed scaring the bejeezus out of his kids, just like my old man. Damn, you’re shaking like crazy.

—The face, the half skull… thing. That was Carling.

—Really. A keen light entered his eyes, less sympathetic than interested. —It’s not a real picture. It’s a drawing, a facsimile. The artists would gather a well-heeled crowd into a parlor and lay this on them. Then the girls would faint, the gents would scream, and everyone had hot toddies after and pretended it was all so very vulgar and it hadn’t affected them in the slightest.

—That was your sister.

—No. It’s an abstracted figure etched onto a plate over one hundred years ago.

She leaped to her feet, took three steps and grabbed the tripod and slung it across the room. The magic lantern crashed through the window and sailed on, shutters shuttering, frail beams of blue and red and yellow rotating, a satellite launched beyond the solar system and into deep space. A breeze ruffled the curtains, snagged them in the jagged hole in the window glass.

—Feel all better? The little fake smile was back, sharper than before. His arms were folded. He clicked the button on the foot of the lamp with his toe. Click, click, clickety-click, and no light. He tried the other lamp. More clicking and the living room remained in darkness but for a bit of light seeping through the hall from the distant kitchen. —Bloody ancient wiring, he said.

—I need a drink, she said. Her pleasant high had been snuffed in the rush of terror.

—Well, that’s a shame, he said. —We’re plumb dry. Dry as a dry county in Bible-thumping country.

—The hell we are, she said. She shrugged on her pea coat and tucked her hair under the collar and walked out the front door. The walkway was paved in irregular stones and bordered by a knee-high stone fence cluttered with roses and other thorny plants. The weak illumination from the kitchen window showed her the way to the car. Clouds hung low against the impenetrable mass of trees and the air was thick and damp and the wan light in the window gave the impression that the house floated atop a vast dark sea. She unlocked the car and considered sliding behind the wheel and making good her escape. The dome light flashed and died. Her gym bag lay on the back seat. She’d stuffed two bottles of whiskey and one of brandy inside. She wasn’t much for hard liquor, save for special occasions. Tonight seemed a worthy exception and she popped the cork and had a slug of whiskey. It helped. A patch of sky brightened and the clouds thinned over the field that separated the lane from the forest. A beam of moonlight filtered down and shone upon the long wet grass, spread rapidly across the field. Mist steamed from the grass and hung like cobwebs in the branches of the trees. The trees shuddered, tops whipping together without wind to stir them, and the grass vibrated rapidly and clods of leaves and dirt drifted lazily into the air. The vista was a snow globe shaken until its innards separated. She swayed, realizing in that instant the phantasmagoria, like a bad acid trip, was still altering her perceptions, and with an act of will she forced the world to steady. Mist and the clouds reformed and the light reversed itself and the curtain of darkness dropped upon the field. Someone shrieked in the distance. She quickly returned to the house. She bolted the door. He came through the French doors that let into the back yard. He carried a flashlight in one hand and some tools wrapped in canvas under his arm.

—A terrible thought has occurred to me, he said. She stared at him, not wanting to know what form this terrible thought of his would assume. She didn’t say anything. He said, —I’m gonna see why Pop spiked my bedroom door. Wanna help?

—After, maybe. She showed him the bottle. They went into the kitchen. There was a bag of crushed ice in the freezer and she put a handful of it into

a pair of water glasses and filled them the rest of the way with whiskey. They drank the whiskey and then stood for a while, holding their empty glasses without speaking or glancing at one another. She thought he was looking worse for the wear. His face was pale and the flesh around his eyes was bruised. A bat smacked into the window and they both jumped. The bat scrabbled and fluttered against the panes and she thought it was trying to warn them.

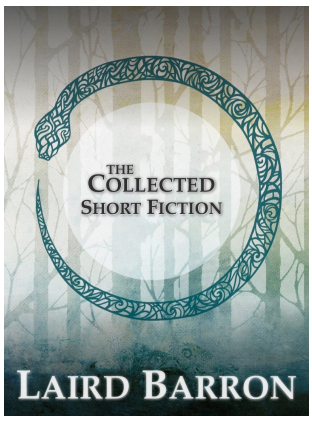
—Bah. I'm going. He set his glass in the sink and collected his tools. His face was sweaty and pale. He shuffled with his head below his shoulders.

She said quickly, —Let's get a hotel. For tonight. We'll come back in the daylight and do whatever it is you've got to do. He shook his head and continued into the hall and toward the stairs at the far end. She followed, and again resisted the temptation to run to the car and burn rubber for the city. The hall was dark. His footsteps creaked on the landing just above her, but when she climbed to the third floor he was already kneeling before the door of his old bedroom, prying at it with a crowbar. He muttered and growled, his hair sticky and disheveled, his features contorted in the shine of the flashlight lying nearby. —What was the terrible thought? she said. He turned his head toward her. His mouth articulated, but made no sound. He stood, gripping a hatchet instead of the crowbar, and she took an unsteady step backward, grabbed the railing at the top of the stairs and narrowly avoided a tumble. —What is it? she said, trying not to sound desperate. At some point during the evening reality had reconstituted at the quantum level, had remade itself, was accelerating toward a final, apocalyptic transmogrification. He swung the hatchet in a ponderous overhand blow against the middle of the door. And again. And again until it cracked and splintered and became a toothy maw. He stopped to survey his work. She cautiously approached him and peeked over his shoulder at what he'd made. An angular hole bored into a space as stale and dry as a tomb. The flashlight was in his hand and its beam wavered across vague shapes, revealing piecemeal, a chair, a trunk, the brass footboard of a child's bed. The bed itself lay in the thicker darkness.

—Wait here, he said. He wriggled through the hole, head and shoulders first. His pants leg ripped. From her perspective she couldn't make sense of the proportions of the room, nor his movements. Suddenly his silhouette

seemed farther away than it should've, as if he'd descended into a cavern. A breath of air sighed from the hole in the door and fluttered her hair. She called his name. He said, —There's something on the… Oh, no. He gave a cry of anguish. The flashlight beam swept in erratic circles as he repeated *Oh no,oh no,oh no!* The light went out and his cries ceased. She peered into the void and said his name again. He didn't answer. Another faint puff of stale air stirred dust motes and burned her nose and throat. The dust stuck to her lips like pollen and tasted vaguely sweet. She briefly entertained the idea of clambering after him, but this notion filled her with overwhelming dread and sent a cascade of disjointed images through her mind. A sluice of blood poured from a split skull, a carrion bird ate a string of guts, a lake of maggots churned and she fell into it from a great height. Was this what he saw whenever he contemplated selling the house? She recoiled with a groan and after a few moments of shocked paralysis, regained her strength and screamed for him until her fear grew too strong and she backed away from the door and made her way down the stairs, leaning against the rail lest she collapse. The record player scratched at a low volume, back to Sinatra and that old black magic. There was a soft, flickering light at the bottom of the stairs. The light emanated from white and black candles arranged at the points of a pentagram scrawled in black wet paint on the living room floor. Her naked husband knelt inside the pentagram and beside a pair of bare feet. She could not see the owner of the feet as the couch partially blocked her view. Carling reclined on the couch. Carling wore a black robe; the robe was open, revealing the white curve of her hip and breast. The family patriarch stood, dressed in a black robe with the cowl thrown back. He was flushed and beaming with paternal joy. His left hand rested upon his son's head. Her husband made a labored sawing motion and the feet twitched and danced, slapping against the floorboards. The room blurred in and out of focus and began to slide toward the crimson edge of her vision. She made a small sound and the trio glanced toward the stairs. They seemed surprised to see her.

The Broadsword



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1

Lately, Pershing dreamed of his long lost friend Terry Walker. Terry himself was seldom actually present; the dreams were soundless and gray as surveillance videos, and devoid of actors. There were trees and fog, and moving shapes like shadow puppets against a wall. On several occasions he'd surfaced from these fitful dreams to muted whispering—he momentarily formed the odd notion a dark figure stood in the doorway. And in that moment his addled brain gave the form substance: his father, his brother, his dead wife, but none of them, of course, for as the fog cleared from his mind, the shadows were erased by morning light, and the whispers receded into the rush and hum of the laboring fan. He wondered if these visions were a sign of impending heat stroke, or worse.

August, and now these first days of September, had proved killingly hot. The air conditioning went offline and would remain so for God knew how long. This was announced by Superintendent Frame after a small mob of irate tenants finally cornered him as he was sneaking from his office, hat in hand. He claimed ignorance of the root cause of their misery. "I've men working on it!" he said as he made his escape; for that day, at least. By the more sour observers' best estimates, "men working on it" meant Hopkins the sole custodian. Hopkins was even better than Superintendent Frame at finding a dark hole and pulling it in after himself. Nobody had seen him in days.

Pershing Dennard did what all veteran tenants of the Broadsword Hotel had done over the years to survive these too-frequent travails: he effected emergency adaptations to his habitat. Out came the made-in-China box fan across which he draped damp wash cloths. He shuttered the windows and snugged heavy drapes to keep his apartment dim. Of course he maintained a

ready supply of vodka in the freezer. The sweltering hours of daylight were for hibernation; dozing on the sofa, a chilled pitcher of lemonade and booze at his elbow. These maneuvers rendered the insufferable slightly bearable, but only by inches.

He wilted in his recliner and stared at the blades of the ceiling fan cutting through the blue-streaked shadows while television static beamed between the toes of his propped-up feet. He listened. Mice scratched behind plaster. Water knocked through the pipes with deep-sea groans and soundings. Vents whistled, transferring dim clangs and screeches from the lower floors, the basement, and lower still, the subterranean depths beneath the building itself.

The hissing ducts occasionally lulled him into a state of semi-hypnosis. He imagined lost caverns and inverted forests of roosting bats, a primordial river that tumbled through midnight grottos until it plunged so deep the stygian black acquired a red nimbus, a vast throbbing heart of brimstone and magma. Beyond the falls, abyssal winds howled and shrieked and called his name. Such images inevitably gave him more of a chill than he preferred and he shook them off, concentrated on baseball scores, the creak and grind of his joints. He'd shoveled plenty of dirt and jogged over many a hill in his career as a state surveyor. Every swing of the spade, every machete chop through temperate jungle had left its mark on muscle and bone.

Mostly, and with an intensity of grief he'd not felt in thirty-six years, more than half his lifetime, he thought about Terry Walker. It probably wasn't healthy to brood. That's what the grief counselor had said. The books said that, too. Yet how could a man *not* gnaw on that bone sometimes?

Anyone who's lived beyond the walls of a cloister has had at least one bad moment, an experience that becomes the proverbial dark secret. In this Pershing was the same as everyone. His own dark moment had occurred many years prior; a tragic event he'd dwelled upon for weeks and months with manic obsession, until he learned to let go, to acknowledge his survivor's guilt and move on with his life. He'd done well to box the memory, to shove it in a dusty corner of his subconscious. He distanced himself from the event until it seemed like a cautionary tale based on a stranger's experiences.

He was an aging agnostic and it occurred to him that, as he marched ever closer to his personal gloaming, the ghosts of Christmases Past had queued up to take him to task, that this heat wave had fostered a delirium appropriate to second-guessing his dismissal of ecclesiastical concerns, and penitence.

In 1973 he and Walker got lost during a remote surveying operation and wound up spending thirty-six hours wandering the wilderness. He'd been doing field work for six or seven years and should have known better than to hike away from the base camp that morning.

At first they'd only gone far enough to relieve themselves. Then, he'd seen something—someone—watching him from the shadow of a tree and thought it was one of the guys screwing around. This was an isolated stretch of high country in the wilds of the Olympic Peninsula. There were homesteads and ranches along its fringes, but not within ten miles. The person, apparently a man, judging from his build, was half-crouched, studying the ground. He waved to Pershing; a casual, friendly gesture. The man's features were indistinct, but at that moment Pershing convinced himself it was Morris Miller or Pete Cabellos, both of whom were rabid outdoorsmen and constantly nattering on about the ecological wonderland in which the crew currently labored. The man straightened and beckoned, sweeping his hand in a come-on gesture. He walked into the trees.

Terry zipped up, shook his head and trudged that direction. Pershing thought nothing of it and tagged along. They went to where the man had stood and discovered what he'd been staring at—an expensive backpack of the variety popular with suburbanite campers. The pack was battered, its shiny yellow and green material shredded. Pershing got the bad feeling it was brand new.

Oh, shit, Terry said. *Maybe a bear nailed somebody. We better get back to camp and tell Higgins.* Higgins was the crew leader; surely he'd put together a search and rescue operation to find the missing owner of the pack. That would have been the sensible course, except, exactly as they turned to go, Pete Cabellos called to them from the woods. His voice echoed and bounced from the cliffs and boulders. Immediately, the men headed in the direction of the yell.

They soon got thoroughly lost. Every tree is the same tree in a forest. Clouds rolled in and it became impossible to navigate by sun or stars. Pershing's compass was back at camp with the rest of his gear, and Terry's was malfunctioning—condensation clouded the glass internally, rendered the needle useless. After a few hours of stumbling around yelling for their colleagues, they decided to follow the downhill slope of the land and promptly found themselves in mysterious hollows and thickets. It was a grave situation, although, that evening as the two camped in a steady downpour, embarrassment figured more prominently than fear of imminent peril.

Terry brought out some jerky and Pershing always carried waterproof matches in his vest pocket, so they got a fire going from the dried moss and dead twigs beneath the boughs of a massive old fir, munched on jerky, and lamented their predicament. The two argued halfheartedly about whether they'd actually heard Pete or Morris calling that morning, or a mysterious third party.

Pershing fell asleep with his back against the mossy bole and was plunged into nightmares of stumbling through the foggy woods. A malevolent presence lurked in the mist and shadows. Figures emerged from behind trees and stood silently. Their wickedness and malice were palpable. He knew with the inexplicable logic of dreams that these phantoms delighted in his terror, that they were eager to inflict unimaginable torments upon him.

Terry woke him and said he'd seen someone moving around just beyond the light of the dying fire. Rain pattering on the leaves made it impossible to hear if anyone was moving around in the bushes, so Terry threw more branches on the fire and they warmed their hands and theorized that the person who'd beckoned them into the woods was the owner of the pack. Terry, ever the pragmatist, suspected the man had struck his head and was now in a raving delirium, possibly even circling their camp.

Meanwhile, Pershing was preoccupied with more unpleasant possibilities. Suppose the person they'd seen had actually killed a hiker and successfully lured them into the wild? Another thought insinuated itself; his grandmother had belonged to a long line of superstitious Appalachian folk. She'd told him and his brother ghost stories and of legends such as the Manitou, and lesser-known tales about creatures who haunted the woods and spied on

men and disappeared when a person spun to catch them. He'd thrilled to her stories while snug before the family hearth with a mug of cocoa and the company of loved ones. The stories took on a different note here in the tall trees.

It rained hard all the next day and the clouds descended into the forest. Emergency protocol dictated staying put and awaiting the inevitable rescue, rather than blindly groping in circles through the fog. About midday, Terry went to get a drink from a spring roughly fifty feet from their campsite. Pershing never saw him again. Well, not quite true: he saw him twice more.

2

Pershing moved into the Broadsword Hotel in 1979, a few months after his first wife, Ethel, unexpectedly passed away. He met second wife, Constance, at a hotel mixer. They were married in 1983, had Lisa Anne and Jimmy within two years, and were divorced by 1989. She said the relationship was doomed from the start because he'd never really finished mourning Ethel. Connie grew impatient of his mooning over old dusty photo albums and playing old moldy tunes on the antique record player he stashed in the closet along with several ill-concealed bottles of scotch. Despite his fondness for liquor, Pershing didn't consider himself a heavy drinker, but rather a steady one.

During their courtship, Pershing talked often of leaving the Broadsword. Oh, she was queenly in her time, a seven-floor art deco complex on the West Side of Olympia on a wooded hill with a view of the water, the marina, and downtown. No one living knew how she'd acquired her bellicose name. She was built in 1918 as a posh hotel, complete with a four-star restaurant, swanky nightclub-cum-gambling hall, and a grand ballroom; the kind of place that attracted not only the local gentry, but visiting Hollywood celebrities, sports figures, and politicians. After passing through the hands of several owners, the Broadsword was purchased by a Midwest corporation and converted to a middle-income apartment complex in 1958. The old girl suffered a number of renovations to wedge in more rooms, but she maintained a fair bit of charm and historical gravitas even five decades and several facelifts later.

Nonetheless, Pershing and Connie had always agreed the cramped quarters were no substitute for a real house with a yard and a fence. Definitely a tough place to raise children—unfortunately, the recession had killed the geophysical company he'd worked for in those days and money was tight.

Connie was the one who eventually got out—she moved to Cleveland and married a banker. The last Pershing heard, she lived in a mansion and had metamorphosed into a white-gloved, garden-party-throwing socialite who routinely got her name in the lifestyle section of the papers. He was happy for her and the kids, and a little relieved for himself. That tiny single-bedroom flat had been crowded!

He moved up as well. Up to the sixth floor into 119; what the old superintendent (in those days it was Anderson Heck) sardonically referred to as an executive suite. According to the super, only two other people had ever occupied the apartment—the so-called executive suites were spacious enough that tenants held onto them until they died. The previous resident was a bibliophile who'd retired from a post at the Smithsonian. The fellow left many books and photographs when he died and his heirs hadn't seen fit to come around and pack up his estate. As it happened, the freight elevator was usually on the fritz in those days and the regular elevator wasn't particularly reliable either. So the superintendent offered Pershing three months' free rent if he personally dealt with the daunting task of organizing and then lugging crates of books and assorted memorabilia down six steep flights to the curb.

Pershing put his muscles to good use. It took him three days' hard labor to clear out the apartment and roughly three hours to move his embarrassingly meager belongings in. The rest, as they say, was history.

3

Pershing would turn sixty-seven in October. Wanda Blankenship, his current girlfriend of nine months and counting, was forty-something—she played it coy, careful not to say, and he hadn't managed a peek at her driver license. He guessed she was pushing fifty, although she took care of herself, hit the Pilates circuit with her chums, and thus passed for a few years on the uphill side. "Grave robber!" he said when she goosed him, or made a half-

hearted swipe at his testicles, which was often, and usually in public. She was a librarian too; a fantasy cliché ironically fulfilled during this, his second or third boyhood when he needed regular doses of the little blue pill to do either of them any justice.

Nine months meant their relationship had slid from the danger zone and come perilously near the edge of no return. He'd gotten comfortable with her sleeping over a couple of nights a week, like a lobster getting cozy in a kettle of warm water. He'd casually mentioned her to Lisa Anne and Jimmy during one of their monthly phone conferences, which was information he usually kept close to his vest. More danger signals: she installed a toothbrush in the medicine cabinet and shampoo in the bath. He couldn't find his extra key one night after coming home late from the Red Room and realized he'd given it to her weeks before in a moment of weakness. As the robot used to say, *Danger, Will Robinson! Danger! Danger!* He was cooked, all right, which was apropos, considering the weather.

"Oh, ye gods! Like hell I'm coming up there!" she said during their latest phone conversation. "My air conditioner is tip top. *You* come over here." She paused to snicker. "Where I can get my hands on you!"

He wanted to argue, to resist, but was too busy melting into the couch, and knew if he refused she'd come flying on her broom to chivvy him away most unceremoniously. Defeated, he put on one of his classier ties, all of which Constance had chosen, and made the pilgrimage—on foot in the savage glare of late afternoon because he walked everywhere, hadn't owned a car since he sold his El Camino in 1982. Walking generally suited him; he'd acquired a taste for it during his years of toil in the wilderness. He took a meager bit of pride in noting that his comfortable "traveling" pace left most men a quarter his age gasping and winded after a short distance.

He disliked visiting her place, a small cottage-style house in a quiet neighborhood near downtown. Not that there was anything wrong with the house itself, aside from the fact it was too tidy, too orderly, and she insisted on china dishes for breakfast, lunch, supper, and tea. He lived in constant fear of dropping something, spilling something, breaking something with his large, clumsy hands. She cheerily dismissed such concerns, remarking that her cups and dishes were relics passed down through the generations

—“They gotta go sometime. Don’t be so uptight.” Obviously, this served to heighten his paranoia.

Wanda made dinner; fried chicken and honeydew, and wine for dessert. Wine disagreed with his insides and gave him a headache. When she broke out the after-dinner merlot, he smiled and drank up like a good soldier. It was the gentlemanly course—also, he was loath to give her any inkling regarding his penchant for the hard stuff. Her husband had drunk himself to death. Pershing figured he could save his own incipient alcoholism as an escape route. If things got too heavy, he could simply crack a bottle of Absolut and guzzle it like soda pop, which would doubtless give him a heart attack. Freedom either way! Meanwhile, the deceit must perforce continue.

They were snuggling on the loveseat, buzzed by wine and luxuriating in the blessed coolness of her living room, when she casually said, “So, who’s the girl?”

Pershing’s heart fluttered, his skin went clammy. Such questions never boded well. He affected nonchalance. “Ah, sweetie, I’m a dashing fellow. Which girl are you talking about?” That heart attack he sometimes dreamt of seemed a real possibility.

Wanda smiled. “The girl I saw leaving your apartment the other morning, silly.”

The fact he didn’t know any girls besides a few cocktail waitresses didn’t make him feel any better. He certainly was guilty of *looking* at lots of girls and couldn’t help but wonder if that was enough to bury him. Then, instead of reassuring her that no such person existed, or that there must be some innocent mistake, he idiotically said, “Oh. What were you doing coming over in the morning?” In short order, he found himself on the porch. The sky was purple and orange with sunset. It was a long, sticky walk back to the hotel.

4

The next day he asked around the Broadsword. Nobody had seen a girl and nobody cared. Nobody had seen Hopkins either. *Him* they cared about. Even Bobby Silver—Sly to his friends—didn’t seem interested in the girl,

and Sly was the worst lecher Pershing had ever met. Sly managed a dry cackle and a nudge to the ribs when Pershing described the mystery girl who'd allegedly come from his apartment. Young (relatively speaking), dark-haired, voluptuous, short black dress, lipstick.

"Heard anything about when they're gonna fix the cooling system? It's hotter than the hobs of Hell in here!" Sly sprawled on a bench just off the columned hotel entrance. He fanned himself with a crinkled Panama hat.

Mark Ordbecker, a high school math teacher who lived in the apartment directly below Pershing's with his wife Harriet and two children, suggested a call to the police. "Maybe one of them should come over and look around." They made this exchange at Ordbecker's door. The teacher leaned against the doorframe, trying in vain to feed the shrieking baby a bottle of milk. His face was red and sweaty. He remarked that the start of the school year would actually be a relief from acting as a househusband. His wife had gone east for a funeral. "The wife flies out and all hell breaks loose. She's going to come home to *my* funeral if the weather doesn't change."

Ordbecker's other child, a five-year-old boy named Eric, stood behind his father. His hair was matted with sweat and his face gleamed, but it was too pale.

"Hi, Eric," Pershing said. "I didn't see you there. How you doing, kiddo?"

Little Eric was normally rambunctious or, as Wanda put it, obstreperous, as in *an obstreperous hellion.* Today he shrank farther back and wrapped an arm around his father's leg.

"Don't mind him. Misses his mom." Mark leaned closer and murmured, "Separation anxiety. He won't sleep by himself while she's gone. You know how kids are." He reached down awkwardly and ruffled the boy's hair. "About your weirdo visitor—call the cops. At least file a report so if this woman's crazy and she comes at you with a pair of shears in the middle of the night and you clock her with a golf club, there's a prior record."

Pershing thanked him. He remained unconvinced this was anything other than a coincidence or possibly Wanda's imagination, spurred by a sudden attack of jealousy. He almost knocked on Phil Wary's door across the hall. The fellow moved in a few years back; a former stage magician, or so went the tales, and a decade Pershing's senior. Well-dressed and amiable, Wary

nonetheless possessed a certain aloofness; also, he conducted a psychic medium service out of his apartment. Tarot readings, hypnosis, séances, all kinds of crackpot business. They said hello in passing, had waited together outside Superintendent Frame's office, and that was the extent of their relationship. Pershing preferred the status quo in this case.

"Cripes, this is all nonsense anyway." He always locked his apartment with a deadbolt; he'd become security-conscious in his advancing years, not at all sure he could handle a robber, what with his bad knees and weak back. Thankfully, there'd been no sign of forced entry, no one other than his girlfriend had seen anything, thus he suspected his time schlepping about the hotel in this beastly heat playing amateur investigator was a colossal waste of energy.

Wanda didn't call, which wasn't surprising considering her stubbornness. Dignity prohibited *him* ringing her. Nonetheless, her silence rankled; his constant clock watching annoyed him, too. It wasn't like him to fret over a woman, which meant he missed her more than he'd have guessed.

As the sun became an orange blob in the west, the temperature peaked. The apartment was suffocating. He dragged himself to the refrigerator and stood before its open door, straddle-legged in his boxers, bathed in the stark white glow. Tepid relief was better than nothing.

Someone whispered behind him and giggled. He turned quickly. The laughter originated in the living area, between the coffee table and a bookshelf. Because the curtains were tightly closed the room lay in a blue-tinged gloom that played tricks on his eyes. He sidled to the sink and swept his arm around until he flicked the switch for the overhead light. This illuminated a sufficient area that he felt confident to venture forth. Frankie Walton's suite abutted his own—and old Frankie's hearing was shot. He had to crank the volume on his radio for the ballgames. Once in a while Pershing heard the tinny exclamations of the play-by-play guys, the roar of the crowd. This, however, sounded like a person was almost on top of him, sneering behind his back.

Closer inspection revealed the sounds had emanated from a vent near the window. He chuckled ruefully as his muscles relaxed. Ordbecker was talking to the baby and the sound carried upstairs. Not unusual; the hotel's

acoustics were peculiar, as he well knew. He knelt and cocked his head toward the vent, slightly guilty at eavesdropping, yet in the full grip of curiosity. People were definitely in conversation, yet, he gradually realized, not the Ordbeckers. These voices were strange and breathy, and came from farther off, fading in and out with a static susurration.

Intestines. Kidneys.

Ohh, either is delectable.

And sweetbreads. As long as they're from a young one.

Ganglia, for me. Or brain. Scoop it out quivering.

Enough! Let's start tonight. We'll take one from—

They tittered and their words degenerated into garble, then stopped.

Shh, shh! Wait!… Someone's listening.

Don't be foolish.

They are. There's a spy hanging on our every word.

How can you tell?

I can hear them breathing.

He clapped his hand over his mouth. His hair stood on end.

I hear you, spy. Which room could you be in? First floor? No, no. The fifth or the sixth.

His heart labored. What was this?

We'll figure it out where you are, dear listener. Pay you a visit. While you sleep. Whoever it was laughed like a child, or someone pretending to be one. *You could always come down here where the mome raths outgrabe.…* Deep in the bowels of the building, the furnace rumbled to life as it did every four hours to push air circulation through the vents. The hiss muffled the crooning threats, which had ceased altogether a few minutes later when the system shut down.

Pershing was stunned and nauseated. Kidneys? Sweetbreads? He picked up the phone to punch in 911 before he got hold of his senses. What on earth would he say to the dispatcher? He could guess what they'd tell him: *Stop watching so many late night thrillers, Mr. Dennard.* He waited, eyeing the vent as if a snake might slither forth, but nothing happened. First the

phantom girl, now this. Pretty soon he'd be jumping at his own shadow. *First stage dementia, just like dear old Dad.* Mom and Uncle Mike put Ernest Dennard in a home for his seventieth birthday. He'd become paranoid and delusional prior to that step. At the home Pop's faculties degenerated until he didn't know if he was coming or going. He hallucinated his sons were the ghosts of war buddies and screamed and tried to leap through his window when they visited. Thankfully, long before this turn of events Mom had the foresight to hide the forty-five caliber pistol he kept in the dresser drawer. Allegedly Grandma went through a similar experience with Gramps. Pershing didn't find his own prospects very cheery.

But you don't have dementia yet, and you don't knock back enough booze to be hallucinating. You heard them, clear as day. Jeezus C., who are they?

Pershing walked around the apartment and flicked on some lights; he checked his watch and decided getting the hell out for a few hours might be the best remedy for his jangled nerves. He put on a suit—nothing fancy, just a habit he'd acquired from his uncle who'd worked as a professor—and felt hat and left. He managed to catch the last bus going downtown. The bus was an oven; empty except for himself, a pair of teens, and the driver. Even so, it reeked from the day's accumulation; a miasma of sweat and armpit stench.

The depot had attracted its customary throng of weary seniors and the younger working poor, and a smattering of fancifully coiffed, tattooed, and pierced students from Evergreen; the former headed home or to the late shift, the latter off to house parties, or bonfires along the inlet beaches. Then there were the human barnacles—a half-dozen toughs decked out in parkas and baggy sports warmup suits despite the crushing heat; the hard, edgy kind who watched everyone else, who appraised the herd. Olympia was by no means a big town, but it hosted more than its share of beatings and stabbings, especially in the northerly quarter inward from the marina and docks. One didn't hang around the old cannery district at night unless one wanted to get mugged.

Tonight none of the ruffians paid him any heed. From the depot he quickly walked through several blocks of semi-deserted industrial buildings and warehouses, made a right and continued past darkened sporting goods

stores, bookshops, and tattoo parlors until he hooked onto a narrow side lane and reached the subtly lighted wooden shingle of the Manticore Lounge. The Manticore was a hole-in-the-wall that catered to a slightly more reserved set of clientele than was typical of the nightclubs and sports bars on the main thoroughfares. Inside was an oasis of coolness, scents of lemon and beer.

Weeknights were slow—two young couples occupied tables near the darkened dais that served as a stage for the four-piece band that played on weekends; two beefy gentlemen in tailored suits sat at the bar. Lobbyists in town to siege the legislature; one could tell by their Rolexes and how the soft lighting from the bar made their power haircuts glisten.

Mel Clayton and Elgin Bane waved him over to their window booth. Mel, an engineering consultant who favored blue button-up shirts, heavy on the starch, and Elgin, a social worker who dressed in black turtlenecks and wore Buddy Holly-style glasses and sometimes lied to women at parties by pretending to be a beat poet; he even stashed a ratty pack of cloves in his pocket for such occasions. He quoted Kerouac and Ginsberg chapter and verse regardless how many rounds of Johnny Walker he'd put away. Pershing figured his friend's jaded posturing, his affected cynicism, was influenced by the depressing nature of his job: he dealt with emotional basket cases, battered wives, and abused children sixty to seventy hours a week. What did they say? At the heart of every cynic lurked an idealist. That fit Elgin quite neatly.

Elgin owned a house in Yelm, and Mel lived on the second floor of the Broadsword—they and Pershing and three or four other guys from the neighborhood got together for drinks at the Manticore or The Red Room at least once a month; more frequently now as the others slipped closer to retirement and as their kids graduated college. Truth be told, he was much closer to these two than he was to his younger brother Carl, who lived in Denver and whom he hadn't spoken with in several months.

Every autumn, the three of them, sometimes with their significant others, drove up into the Black Hills outside Olympia to a hunting cabin Elgin's grandfather owned. None of them hunted; they enjoyed lounging on the rustic porch, roasting marshmallows, and sipping hot rum around the campfire. Pershing relished these excursions—no one ever wanted to go

hiking or wander far from the cabin, and thus his suppressed dread of wilderness perils remained quiescent, except for the occasional stab of nervousness when the coyotes barked, or the wind crashed in the trees, or his unease at how perfectly dark the woods became at night.

Mel bought him a whiskey sour—Mel invariably insisted on covering the tab. *It's you boys or my ex-wife, so drink up!* Pershing had never met the infamous Nancy Clayton; she was the inimitable force behind Mel's unceremonious arrival at the Broadsword fifteen years back, although judging from his flirtatious behavior with the ladies, his ouster was doubtless warranted. Nancy lived in Seattle with her new husband in the Lake Washington townhouse Mel toiled through many a late night and weekend to secure. He'd done better with Regina, his second wife. Regina owned a bakery in Tumwater and she routinely made cookies for Pershing and company. A kindly woman and large-hearted; she'd immediately adopted Mel's cast of misfit friends and associates.

After the trio had chatted for a few minutes, griping about the "damnable" weather, mainly, Elgin said, "What's eating you? You haven't touched your drink."

Pershing winced at *eating.* He hesitated, then chided himself. What sense to play coy? Obviously he wished to talk about what happened. Why else had he come scuttling in from the dark, tail between his legs? "I… heard something at home earlier tonight. People whispering in the vent. Weird, I know. But it really scared me. The stuff they said…"

Mel and Elgin exchanged glances. Elgin said, "Like what?"

Pershing told them. Then he briefly described what Wanda said about the mystery girl. "The other thing that bothers me is… this isn't the first time. The last couple of weeks I've been hearing stuff. Whispers. I wrote those off. Now, I'm not so sure."

Mel stared into his glass. Elgin frowned and set his palm against his chin in apparently unconscious imitation of *The Thinker.* He said, "Hmm. That's bizarre. Kinda screwed up, in fact. It almost makes me wonder—"

"—if your place is bugged," Mel said.

"Bugged?"

“This from the man with a lifetime subscription to the *Fortean Times,”* Elgin said. “Damn, but sometimes I think you and Freeman would make a great couple.” Randy Freeman being an old school radical who’d done too much Purple Haze in the ’60s and dialed into the diatribes of a few too many Che Guevara-loving hippie chicks for his own good. He was another of The Red Room set.

Mel took Elgin’s needling in stride. “Hey, I’m dead serious. Two and two, baby. I’ll lay odds somebody miked Percy’s apartment.”

“For the love of—” Elgin waved him off, settling into his mode of dismissive impatience. “Who on God’s green earth would do something crazy like that? *No-freaking-body,* that’s who.”

“It is a bit farfetched,” Pershing said. “On the other hand, if you’d heard this crap. I dunno.”

“Oh, hell.” Elgin took a sip of his drink, patently incredulous.

“Jeez, guys—I’m not saying Homeland Security wired it for sound… maybe another tenant is playing games. People do wacko things.”

“No forced entry.” Pershing pointed at Mel. “And don’t even say it might be Wanda. I’ll have to slug you.”

“Nah, Wanda’s not sneaky. Who else has got a key?”

Elgin said, “The super would have one. I mean, if you’re determined to go there, then that’s the most reasonable suspect. Gotta tell you, though—you’re going to feel like how Mel looks when it turns out to be television noise—which is to say, an idiot.”

“Ha, ha. Question is, what to do?”

“Elgin’s right. Let’s not make a bigger deal of this than it is… I got spooked.”

“And the light of reason shines through. I’m going to the head.” Elgin stood and made his way across the room and disappeared around a big potted fern.

Pershing said, “Do you mind if I sleep on your couch? If I’m not intruding, that is.”

Mel smiled. “No problem. Gina doesn’t care. Just be warned she goes to work at four in the morning, so she’ll be stumbling around the apartment.” He glanced over to make certain Elgin was still safely out of sight. “Tomorrow I’ll come up and help you scope your pad. A while back Freeman introduced me to a guy in Tacoma who runs one of those spy shops with the mini-cameras and microphones. I’ll get some tools and we’ll see what’s what.”

After another round Elgin drove them back to the Broadsword. Just before he pulled away, he stuck his head out the window and called, “Don’t do anything crazy.”

“Which one of us is he talking to?” Mel said, glaring over his shoulder.

“I’m talking to both of you,” Elgin said. He gunned the engine and zipped into the night.

5

Regina had already gone to bed. Mel tiptoed around his darkened apartment getting a blanket and a pillow for Pershing, cursing softly as he bumped into furniture. Two box fans blasted, but the room was muggy as a greenhouse. Once the sleeping arrangements were made, he got a six-pack of Heineken from the refrigerator and handed one to Pershing. They kicked back and watched a repeat of the Mariners game with the volume turned most of the way down. The seventh-inning stretch did Mel in. His face had a droopy, hangdog quality that meant he was loaded and ready to crash. He said goodnight and sneaked unsteadily toward the bedroom.

Pershing watched the rest of the game, too lethargic to reach for the remote. Eventually he killed the television and lay on the couch, sweat molding his clothes to him like a second skin. His heart felt sluggish. A night light in the kitchen cast ghostly radiance upon the wall, illuminating bits of Regina’s Ansel Adams prints, the glittery mica eyes of her menagerie of animal figurines on the mantel. Despite his misery, he fell asleep right away.

A woman gasped in pleasure. That brought him up from the depths. The cry repeated, muffled by the wall of Mel and Gina’s bedroom. He stared at the ceiling, mortified, thinking that Mel certainly was one hell of a randy bastard after he got a few drinks under his belt. Then someone whispered,

perhaps five feet to his left where the light didn't penetrate. The voice chanted: *This old man, this old man.…*

The syrupy tone wicked away the heat as if he'd fallen into a cold, black lake. He sat upright so quickly pains sparked in his neck and back. His only consolation lay in the recognition of the slight echoing quality, which suggested the person was elsewhere. Whistling emanated from the shadows, its falsetto muted by the background noise. He clumsily sprang from the couch, his fear transformed to a more useful sense of anger, and crab-walked until he reached the proper vent. "Hey, jerk!" he said, placing his face within kissing distance of the grill. "I'm gonna break your knees with my baseball bat if you don't shut your damn mouth!" His bravado was thin—he did keep a Louisville slugger, signed by Ken Griffey Jr., no less, in the bedroom closet in case a burglar broke in at night. Whether he'd be able to break anyone's knees was open to question.

The whistling broke off mid-tune. Silence followed. Pershing listened so hard his skull ached. He said to himself with grudging satisfaction, "That's right, creepos, you *better* stuff a sock in it." His sense of accomplishment was marred by the creeping dread that the reason his tormentors (or was it Mel's since this was his place?) had desisted was because they even now prowled the stairwells and halls of the old building, patiently searching for him.

He finally went and poured a glass of water and huddled at the kitchen table until dawn lighted the windows and Gina stumbled in to make coffee.

6

The temperature spiked to one hundred and three degrees by two p.m. the following afternoon. He bought Wanda two dozen roses with a card and chocolates, and arranged to have them delivered to her house. Mission accomplished, he went directly to an air-conditioned coffee shop, found a dark corner, and ordered half a dozen consecutive frozen drinks. That killed time until his rendezvous with Mel at the Broadsword.

Mel grinned like a mischievous schoolboy when he showed off his fiber-optic snooper cable, a meter for measuring electromagnetic fluctuations,

and his battered steel toolbox. Pershing asked if he'd done this before and Mel replied that he'd learned a trick or two in the Navy.

"Just don't destroy anything," Pershing said. At least a dozen times he'd started to tell Mel about the previous night's visitation, the laughter; after all, if this was occurring in different apartments on separate floors, the scope of such a prank would be improbable. He couldn't devise a way to break it to his friend and still remain credible, and so kept his peace, miserably observing the operation unfold.

After lugging the equipment upstairs, Mel spread a dropcloth to protect the hardwood floor and arrayed his various tools with the affected studiousness of a surgeon preparing to perform open-heart surgery. Within five minutes he'd unscrewed the antique brass grillwork plate and was rooting around inside the guts of the duct with a flashlight and a big screwdriver. Next, he took a reading with the voltmeter, then, finding nothing suspicious, made a laborious circuit of the entire apartment, running the meter over the other vents, the molding, and outlets. Pershing supplied him with glasses of lemonade to diffuse his own sense of helplessness.

Mel switched off the meter, wiped his face and neck with a damp cloth. He gulped the remainder of the pitcher of lemonade and shook his head with disappointment. "Damn. Place is clean. Well, except for some roaches."

"I'll make Frame gas them later. So, nothing, eh? It's funny acoustics. Or my imagination."

"Yeah, could be. Ask your neighbors if they heard anything odd lately."

"I dunno. They already gave me the fishy eye after I made the rounds checking on Wanda's girl. Maybe I should leave it alone for now. See what happens."

"That's fine as long as whatever happens isn't bad." Mel packed his tools with a disconsolate expression.

The phone rang. "I love you, baby," Wanda said on the other end.

"Me too," Pershing said. "I hope you liked the flowers." Meanwhile, Mel gave him a thumbs up and let himself out. Wanda asked if he wanted to come over and it was all Pershing could do to sound composed. "It's a date. I'll stop and grab a bottle of vino."

“No way, Jose; you don’t know Jack about wine. I’ll take care of that—you just bring yourself on over.”

After they disconnected he said, “Thank God.” Partly because a peace treaty with Wanda was a relief. The other portion, the much larger portion, frankly, was that he could spend the night well away from the Broadsword. *Yeah, that’s fine, girly man. How about tomorrow night? How about the one after that?*

For twenty years he’d chewed on the idea of moving; every time the furnace broke in the winter, the cooling system died in the summer, or when the elevators went offline sans explanation from management for weeks on end, he’d joined the crowd of malcontents who wrote letters to the absentee landlord, threatened to call the state, to sue, to breach the rental contract and disappear. Maybe the moment had come to make good on that. Yet in his heart he despaired of escaping; he was a part of the hotel now. It surrounded him like a living tomb.

7

He dreamed that he woke and dressed and returned to the Broadsword. In this dream he was a passenger inside his own body, an automaton following its clockwork track. The apartment smelled stale from days of neglect. Something was wrong, however; off kilter, almost as if it wasn’t his home at all, but a clever re-creation, a stage set. Certain objects assumed hyper-reality, while others submerged into a murky background. The sugar in the glass bowl glowed and dimmed and brightened, like a pulse. Through the window, leaden clouds scraped the tops of buildings and radio antennas vibrated, transmitting a signal that he felt in his skull, his teeth fillings, as a squeal of metal on metal. His nose bled.

He opened the bathroom door and stopped, confronted by a cavern. The darkness roiled humid and rank, as if the cave was an abscess in the heart of some organic mass. Waves of purple radiation undulated at a distance of feet, or miles, and from those depths resonated the metallic clash of titanic ice flows colliding.

“It’s not a cave,” Bobby Silver said. He stood inside the door, surrounded by shadows so that his wrinkled face shone like the sugar bowl. His face

was suspended in the blackness. “This is the surface. And it’s around noon, local time. We do, however, spend most of our lives underground. We like the dark.”

“Where?” He couldn’t manage more than a dry whisper.

“Oh, you *know,*” Sly said, and laughed. “C’mon, bucko—we’ve been beaming this into your brain for months—”

“No. Not possible. I’ve worn my tinfoil hat every day.”

“—our system orbits a brown star, and it’s cold, so we nestle in heaps and mounds that rise in ziggurats and pyramids. We swim in blood to stay warm, wring it from the weak the way you might squeeze juice from an orange.”

Pershing recognized the voice from the vent. “You’re a fake. Why are you pretending to be Bobby Silver?”

“Oh. If I didn’t wear this, you wouldn’t comprehend me. Should I remove it?” Sly grinned, seized his own cheek, and pulled. His flesh stretched like taffy accompanied by a squelching sound. He winked and allowed it to deform to a human shape. “It’s what’s underneath that counts. You’ll see. When we come to stay with you.”

Pershing said, “I don’t want to see anything.” He tried to flee, to run shrieking, but this being a dream, he was rooted, trapped, unable to do more than mumble protestations.

“Yes, Percy, you do,” Ethel said from behind him. “We love you.” As he twisted his head to gape at her, she gave him the soft, tender smile he remembered, the one that haunted his waking dreams, and then put her hand against his face and shoved him into the dark.

8

He stayed over at Wanda’s place for a week—hid out, like a criminal seeking sanctuary from the Church. Unhappily, this doubtless gave Wanda the wrong impression (although at this point even Pershing wasn’t certain what impression she *should* have), but at all costs he needed a vacation from his suddenly creep-infested heat trap of an apartment. Prior to this

he'd stayed overnight fewer than a dozen times. His encampment at her house was noted without comment.

Jimmy's twenty-sixth birthday fell on a Sunday. After morning services at Wanda's Lutheran church, a handsome brick building only five minutes from the Broadsword, Pershing went outside to the quiet employee parking lot and called him. Jimmy had wanted to be an architect since elementary school. He went into construction, which Pershing thought was close enough despite the nagging suspicion his son wouldn't agree. Jimmy lived in California at the moment—he migrated seasonally along the West Coast, chasing jobs. Pershing wished him a happy birthday and explained a card was in the mail. He hoped the kid wouldn't check the postmark as he'd only remembered yesterday and rushed to get it sent before the post office closed.

Normally he was on top of the family things: the cards, the phone calls, the occasional visit to Lisa Anne when she attended Berkeley. Her stepfather, Barton Ingles III, funded college, which simultaneously indebted and infuriated Pershing, whose fixed income allowed little more than his periodic visits and a small check here and there. Now graduated, she worked for a temp agency in San Francisco and, embarrassingly, her meager base salary surpassed his retirement.

Toward the end of their conversation, after Pershing's best wishes and obligatory questions about the fine California weather and the job, Jimmy said, "Well, Pop, I hate to ask this…"

"Uh, oh. What have I done now? Don't tell me you need money."

Jimmy chuckled uneasily. "Nah, if I needed cash I'd ask Bart. He's a tightwad, but he'll do anything to impress Mom, you know? No, it's… how do I put this? Are you, um, drinking? Or smoking the ganja, or something? I hate to be rude, but I gotta ask."

"Are you kidding?"

There was a long, long pause. "Okay. Maybe I'm… Pop, you called me at like two in the morning. Wednesday. You tried to disguise your voice—"

"Wha-a-t?" Pershing couldn't wrap his mind around what he was hearing. "I did no such thing, James." He breathed heavily, perspiring more than even the weather called for.

“Pop, calm down, you’re hyperventilating. Look, I’m not pissed—I just figured you got hammered and hit the speed dial. It would’ve been kinda funny if it hadn’t been so creepy. Singing, no less.”

“But it wasn’t me! I’ve been with Wanda all week. She sure as hell would’ve noticed if I got drunk and started prank calling my family. I’ll get her on the phone—”

“Really? Then is somebody sharing your pad? This is the twenty-first century, Pop. I got star sixty-nine. Your number.”

“Oh.” Pershing’s blood drained into his belly. He covered his eyes with his free hand because the glare from the sidewalk made him dizzy. “What did I—this person—sing, exactly?”

“‘This Old Man,’ or whatever it’s called. Although you, or they, added some unpleasant lyrics. They slurred… falsetto. When I called back, whoever it was answered. I asked what gave and they laughed. Pretty nasty laugh, too. I admit, I can’t recall you ever making that kinda sound.”

“It wasn’t me. Sober, drunk, whatever. Better believe I’m going to find the bastard. There’s been an incident or three around here. Wanda saw a prowler.”

“All right, all right. If that’s true, then maybe you should get the cops involved.”

“Yeah.”

“And Pop—let me explain it to Mom and Lisa before you get on the horn with them. Better yet, don’t even bother with Mom. She’s pretty much freaked outta her mind.”

“They were called.”

“Yeah. Same night. A real spree.”

Pershing could only stammer and mumble when his son said he had to run, and then the line was dead. Wanda appeared from nowhere and touched his arm and he nearly swung on her. She looked shocked and her gaze fastened on his fist. He said, “Jesus, honey, you scared me.”

“I noticed,” she said. She remained stiff when he hugged her. The tension was purely reflexive, or so he hoped. His batting average with her just kept

sinking. He couldn't do a much better job of damaging their relationship if he tried.

"I am so, so sorry," he said, and it was true. He hadn't told her about the trouble at the Broadsword. It was one thing to confide in his male friends, and quite another to reveal the source of his anxiety to a girlfriend, or any vulnerability for that matter. He'd inherited his secretiveness from Pop who in turn had hidden his own fears behind a mask of stoicism; this personality trait was simply a fact of life for Dennard men.

She relented and kissed his cheek. "You're jumpy. Is everything all right?"

"Sure, sure. I saw a couple of the choir kids flashing gang signs and thought one of the little jerks was sneaking up on me to go for my wallet."

Thankfully, she accepted this and held his hand as they walked to her car.

9

A storm rolled in. He and Wanda sat on her back porch, which commanded a view of the distant Black Hills. Clouds swallowed the mountains. A damp breeze fluttered the cocktail napkins under their half-empty Corona bottles, rattled the burnt yellow leaves of the maple tree branches overhead.

"Oh, my," Wanda said. "There goes the drought."

"We better hurry and clear the table." Pershing estimated at the rate the front was coming they'd be slammed inside of five minutes. He helped her grab the dishes and table settings. Between trips the breeze stiffened dramatically. Leaves tore from the maple, from trees in neighboring yards, went swirling in small technicolor cyclones. He dashed in with the salad bowl as the vanguard of rain pelted the deck. Lightning flared somewhere over the Waddel Valley; the boom came eight seconds later. The next thunderclap was much closer. They stood in her window, watching the show until he snapped out of his daze and suggested they retreat to the middle of the living room to be safe.

They cuddled on the sofa, half watching the news while the lights flickered. Wind roared around the house and shook its frame as if a freight train slammed along tracks within spitting distance of the window, or a passenger jet winding its turbines for takeoff. The weather signaled a change in their

static routine of the past week. Each knew without saying it that Pershing would return to the Broadsword in the morning, and their relationship would revert to its more nebulous aspect. Pershing also understood from her melancholy glance, the measured casualness in her acceptance, that while matters between them would remain undefined, a line had been crossed.

He thought about this in the deepest, blackest hours of night while they lay in bed, she gently snoring, her arm draped across his chest. How much easier his life would be if his mock comment to Elgin and Mel proved true —that Wanda was a lunatic; a split personality type who was behind the stalking incidents. *God, I miss you, Ethel.*

10

"Houston, we have a problem," Mel said. He'd brought ham sandwiches and coffee to Pershing's apartment for an early supper. He was rattled. "I checked around. Not just you hearing things. Odd, odd stuff going on, man."

Pershing didn't want to hear, not after the normalcy of staying with Wanda. And the dreams… "You don't say." He really wished Mel wouldn't.

"The cops have been by a couple of times. Turns out other tenants have seen that chick prowling the halls, trying doorknobs. There's a strange dude, as well—dresses in a robe, like a priest. Betsy Tremblay says the pair knocked on her door one night. The man asked if he could borrow a cup of sugar. Betsy was watching them through the peephole—she says the lady snickered and the man grinned and shushed her by putting his finger over his lips. Scared the hell out of Betsy; she told them to scram and called the cops."

"A cup of sugar," Pershing said. He glanced out at the clouds. It was raining.

"Yeah, the old meet-your-cute-neighbor standby. Then I was talking to Fred Nilson; he's pissed because somebody below him is talking all night. 'Whispering,' he said. Only problem is, the apartment below his belongs to a guy named Brad Cox. Cox is overseas. His kids come by every few days to water the plants and feed the guppies. Anyway, no matter how you slice it, something peculiar is going on around here. Doncha feel better?"

“I never thought I was insane.”

Mel chuckled uneasily. “I was chatting with Gina about the whole thing, and she said she’d heard someone singing while she was in the bath. It came up through the vent. Another time, somebody giggled in the closet while she dressed. She screamed and threw her shoe. This was broad daylight, mind you—no one in there, of course.”

“Why would there be?”

“Right. Gina thought she was imagining things; she didn’t want to tell me in case I decided she was a nut. Makes me wonder how many other people are having these… experiences and just keeping it to themselves.”

The thought should have given Pershing comfort, but it didn’t. His feelings of dread only intensified. *I’m almost seventy, damn it. I’ve lived in the woods, surrounded by grizzlies and wolves; spent months hiking the ass end of nowhere with a compass and an entrenchment spade. What the hell do I have to be scared of after all that?* And the little voice in the back of his mind was quick to supply Sly’s answer from the nightmare, *Oh, you know.* He said, “Food for thought. I guess the police will sort through it.”

“Sure they will. Maybe if somebody gets their throat slashed, or is beaten to death in a home invasion. Otherwise, I bet they just write us off as a bunch of kooks and go back to staking out the doughnut shop. Looks like a police convention some mornings at Gina’s store.”

“Wanda wants me to move in with her. I mean, I think she does.”

“That’s a sign. You should get while the getting’s good.”

They finished the sandwiches and the beer. Mel left to meet Gina when she got home from work. Pershing shut the door and slipped the bolt. The story about the strange couple had gotten to him. He needed a stiff drink.

The lights blinked rapidly and failed. The room darkened to a cloudy twilight and the windows became opaque smudges. Sounds of rain and wind dwindled and ceased. “Gracious, I thought he’d *never* leave.” Terry Walker peeked at him from the upper jamb of the bedroom door. He was attached to the ceiling by unknown means, neck extended with a contortionist’s ease so his body remained obscured. His face was very white. He slurred as if he hadn’t used his vocal chords in a while, as if he

spoke through a mouthful of mush. Then Pershing saw why. Black yolks of blood spooled from his lips in strands and splattered on the carpet. “Hello, Percy.”

“You’re alive,” Pershing said, amazed at the calmness of his own voice. Meanwhile, his brain churned with full-blown panic, reminding him he was talking to an apparition or an imposter.

“So it seems.” Terry was unchanged from youth—clean-shaven, red hair curling below his ears, and impressive mutton chop sideburns in the style that had been vogue during the ’70s.

“It was you in the vents?” Then, as an afterthought, “How could you terrorize my family?”

“I got bored waiting all week for you to come back. Don’t be mad—none of them ever cared for you anyway. Who knows—perhaps we’ll get a chance to visit each and every one, make them understand what a special person you are.” Terry grinned an unpleasant, puckered grin and dropped to the floor, limber as an eel. He dressed in a cassock the color of blackened rust.

“Holy crap. You look like you’ve come from a black mass.” Pershing chuckled nervously, skating along the fine line of hysteria. There was something wrong with his friend’s appearance—his fingers and wrists had too many joints and his neck was slightly overlong by a vertebra or two. This wasn’t quite the Terry Walker he knew, and yet, to some degree it *was,* and thus intensified his fear, his sense of utter dislocation from reality. “Why *are* you here? Why have you come back?” he said, and regretted it when Terry’s smile bloomed with satanic joy.

“Surveying.”

“Surveying?” Pershing felt a new appreciation for the depths of meaning in that word, the inherent coldness. Surveying preceded the destruction of one order to make way for another, stronger, more adaptable order.

“What else would I do? A man’s got to have a niche in the universe.”

“Who are you working for?” *Oh Lord, let it be the FBI, Homeland Security, anybody.* Still trying for levity, he said, “Fairly sure I paid my taxes, and I don’t subscribe to *American Jihadist.* You’re not here to ship me to

Guantánamo, or wherever, are you? Trust me, I don't know jack squat about anything."

"There's a migration in progress. A Diaspora, if you will. It's been going on… Well, when numbers grow to a certain proportion, they lose relevance. We creep like mold." Terry's grin showed that the inside of his mouth was composed of blackened ridges, and indeed toothless. His tongue pulsed; a sundew expanding and contracting in its puddle of gore. "Don't worry, though, Earthman. We come in peace." He laughed and his timbre ascended to the sickly sweet tones of a demented child. "Besides, we're happy to live in the cracks; your sun is too bright for now. Maybe after it burns down a bit…"

The bathroom door creaked open and the woman in the black dress emerged. She said, "Hullo there, love. I'm Gloria. A pleasure to meet you." Her flesh glowed like milk in a glass, like the sugar bowl in his visions. To Terry, she said, "He's older than I thought."

"But younger than he appears." Terry studied Pershing, his eyes inscrutable. "City life hasn't softened you, has it, pal?" He nodded at the woman. "I'm going to take him. It's my turn to choose."

"Okay, dear." The woman leaned her hip against the counter. She appeared exquisitely bored. "At least there'll be screaming."

"Isn't there always?"

Pershing said, "Terry… I'm sorry. There was a massive search. I spent two weeks scouring the hills. Two hundred men and dogs. You should've seen it." The secret wound opened in him and all the buried guilt and shame spilled forth. "Man, I wanted to save you. It destroyed me."

"You think I'm a ghost? That's depressingly provincial of you, friend."

"I don't know what to think. Maybe I'm not even awake." Pershing was nearly in tears.

"Rest assured, you will soon make amazing discoveries," Terry said. "Your mind will shatter if we aren't careful. In any event, I haven't come to exact vengeance upon you for abandoning me in the mountains."

The woman smirked. "He'll wish you were here for that, won't he?"

“Damn you, you’re not my friend,” Pershing said. “And lady, you aren’t Gloria, whoever she was—poor girl’s probably on a milk carton. You wear faces so we will understand your language, so you can blend in, isn’t that right? Who are you people, really?”

“Who are you people?” Gloria mimicked. “The Children of Old Leech. Your betters.”

“Us?” Terry said. “Why, we’re kin. Older and wiser, of course. Our tastes are more refined. We prefer the dark, but you will too. I promise.” He moved to a shelf of Pershing’s keepsakes—snapshots from the field, family photos in silver frames, and odd pieces of bric-a-brac—and picked up Ethel’s rosary and rattled it. “As I recall, you weren’t a man of any particular faith. I don’t blame you, really. The New Testament God is so nebulous, so much of the ether. You’ll find my civilization’s gods to be quite tangible. One of them, a minor deity, dwells in this very system in the caverns of an outer moon. Spiritual life is infinitely more satisfying when you can meet the great ones, touch them, and, if you’re fortunate, be indulged…”

Pershing decided to go through the woman and get a knife from the butcher block. He didn’t relish the notion of punching a girl, but Terry was bigger than him, had played safety for his high school football team. He gathered himself to move—

Gloria said, “Percy, want me to show you something? You should see what Terry saw… when you left him alone with us.” She bowed her neck and cupped her face. There came the cracking as of an eggshell; blood oozed through her fingers as she lifted the hemisphere of her face away from its bed. It made a viscid, sucking sound; the sound of bones scraping together through jelly. Something writhed in the hollow. While Pershing was transfixed in sublime horror, Terry slid over and patted his shoulder.

“She’s got a cruel sense of humor. Maybe you better not watch the rest.” He smiled paternally and raised what appeared to be a bouquet of mushrooms, except these were crystalline and twinkled like Christmas lights.

Violet fire lashed Pershing.

11

In UFO abduction stories, hapless victims are usually paralyzed and then sucked up in a beam of bright light. Pershing was taken through a hole in the sub-basement foundation into darkness so thick and sticky it flowed across his skin. They *did* use tools on him, and, as the woman predicted, he screamed, although not much came through his lips, which had been sealed with epoxy.

An eternal purple-black night ruled the fleshy coomb of an alien realm. Gargantuan tendrils slithered in the dark, coiling and uncoiling, and the denizens of the underworld arrived in an interminable procession through vermiculate tubes and tunnels, and gathered, chuckling and sighing, in appreciation of his agonies. In the great and abiding darkness, a sea of dead white faces brightened and glimmered like porcelain masks at a grotesque ball. He couldn't discern their forms, only the luminescent faces, their plastic, drooling joy.

We love you, Percy, the Terry-creature whispered before it rammed a needle into Pershing's left eye.

12

His captors dug in his brain for memories and made him relive them. The one they enjoyed best was the day of Pershing's greatest anguish:

When Terry hadn't returned to their impromptu campsite after ten minutes, Pershing went looking for him. The rain slashed through the woods, accompanied by gusts that snapped the foliage, caused treetops to clash. He tramped around the spring and saw Terry's hat pinned and flapping in some bushes. Pershing began to panic. Night came early in the mountains, and if sundown found him alone and isolated… Now he was drenched as well. Hypothermia was a real danger.

He caught movement from the corner of his eye. A figure walked across a small clearing a few yards away and vanished into the underbrush. Pershing's heart thrilled and he shouted Terry's name, actually took several steps toward the clearing, then stopped. What if it wasn't his friend? The gait had seemed wrong. Cripes, what if, what if? What if someone truly was

stalking them? Farfetched; the stuff of late-night fright movies. But the primeval ruled in this place. His senses were tuned to a much older frequency than he'd ever encountered. The ape in him, the lizard, hissed warnings until his hackles rose. He lifted a stone from the muck and hefted it, and moved forward.

He tracked a set of muddy footprints into a narrow ravine. Rock outcroppings and brush interlaced to give the ravine a roof. Toadstools and fungi grew in clusters among beds of moss and mold. Water dripped steadily and formed shallow pools of primordial slime. There was Terry's jacket in a wad; and ten yards further in, his pants and shirt hanging from a dead tree that had uprooted and tumbled down into the gulley. A left hiking shoe had been dropped nearby. The trail ended in a jumble of rocks piled some four or five yards high. A stream, orange and alkaline, dribbled over shale and granite. There was something about this wall of stone that accentuated his fear; this was a timeless grotto, and it radiated an ineffable aura of wickedness, of malign sentience. Pershing stood in its presence, feeling like a Neanderthal with a torch in hand, trembling at the threshold of the lair of a nameless beast.

Two figures in filthy robes stood over a third, mostly naked man, his body caked in mud and leaves. The moment elongated, stretched from its bloom in September 1973 across three and a half decades, embedded like a cyst in Pershing's brain. The strangers grasped Terry's ankles with hands so pale they shone in the gloom. They wore deep cowls that hid their faces… yet, in Pershing's nightmares, that inner darkness squirmed with vile intent.

The robed figures regarded him; one crooked a long, oddly jointed finger. Then the strangers laughed—that sickening, diabolic laughter of a man mimicking a child—and dragged Terry away. Terry lay supine, eyes open, mouth slack, head softly bumping over the slimy rocks, arms trailing, limp, an inverted Jesus hauled toward his gruesome fate. They walked into the shadows, through a sudden fissure in the rocks, and were gone forever.

13

The one that imitated Terry released him from the rack and towed him, drifting with the ungainly coordination of a punctured float, through a

stygian wasteland. This one murmured to him in the fashion of a physician, a historian, a tour guide, the histories and customs of its race. His captor tittered, hideously amused at Pershing's perception of having been cast into a subterranean hell.

Not hell or any of its pits. You have crossed the axis of time and space by means of technologies that were old when your kind yet oozed in brine. You, sweet man, are in the black forest of cosmic night.

Pershing imagined passing over a colossal reef of flesh and bone, its coils and ridges populated by incalculable numbers of horridly intelligent beings that had flown from their original planets, long since gone cold and dead, and spread implacably across the infinite cosmos. This people traveled in a cloud of seeping darkness. Their living darkness was a cancerous thing, a mindless, organic suspension fluid that protected them from the noxious light of foreign stars and magnified their psychic screams of murder and lust. It was their oxygen and their blood. They suckled upon it, and in turn, it fed upon them.

We eat our children, Terry had said. *Immortals have no need for offspring. We're gourmands, you see; and we do love our sport. We devour the children of every sentient race we metastasize to… we've quite enjoyed our visit here. The amenities are exquisite.*

He also learned their true forms, while humanoid, were soft and wet and squirming. The human physiognomies they preferred for brief field excursions were organic shells grown in vats, exoskeletons that served as temporary camouflage and insulation from the hostile environments of terrestrial worlds. In their own starless demesne they hopped and crawled and slithered as was traditional.

Without warning, he was dropped from a great height into a body of water that bore him to its surface and buoyed him with its density, its syrupy thickness. He was overcome with the searing stench of rot and sewage. From above, someone grasped his hair and dragged him to an invisible shore.

There came a long, blind crawl through what felt like a tunnel of raw meat, an endless loop of intestine that squeezed him along its tract. He went forward, chivvied by unseen devils who whispered obscenities in his ear

and caressed him with pincers and stinging tendrils, who dripped acid on the back of his neck and laughed as he screamed and thrashed in the amniotic soup, the quaking entrails. Eventually, a light appeared and he wormed his way to it, gibbering mindless prayers to whatever gods might be interested.

"It is always hot as hell down here," Hopkins the custodian said. He perched on a tall box, his grimy coveralls and grimy face lighted by the red glow that flared from the furnace window. "There's a metaphor for ya. Me stoking the boiler in Hell."

Pershing realized the custodian had been chatting at him for a while. He was wedged in the corner of the concrete wall. His clothes stuck to him with sweat, the drying juices of a slaughterhouse. He smelled his own rank ammonia odor. Hopkins grinned and struck a match and lighted a cigarette. The brief illumination revealed a nearly done-in bottle of Wild Turkey leaning against his thigh. Pershing croaked and held out his hand. Hopkins chuckled. He jumped down and gave Pershing the bottle.

"Finish it off. I've got three more hid in my crib, yonder." He gestured into the gloom. "Mr. 119, isn't it? Yeah, Mr. 119. You been to hell, now ain't you? You're hurtin' for certain."

Pershing drank, choking as the liquor burned away the rust and foulness. He gasped and managed to ask, "What day is it?"

Hopkins held his arm near the furnace grate and checked his watch. "Thursday, 2:15 p.m., and all is well. Not really, but nobody knows the trouble we see, do they?"

Thursday afternoon? He'd been with *them* for seventy-two hours, give or take. Had anyone noticed? He dropped the bottle and it clinked and rolled away. He gained his feet and followed the sooty wall toward the stairs. Behind him, Hopkins started singing "Black Hole Sun."

14

As it happened, he spent the rest of the afternoon and much of the evening in an interrogation room at the police station on Perry Street. When he reached his apartment, he found Superintendent Frame had left a note on

the door saying he was to contact the authorities immediately. There were frantic messages from Mel and Wanda on the answering machine wondering where he'd gone, and one from a Detective Klecko politely asking that he report to the precinct as soon as possible.

He stripped his ruined clothes and stared at his soft, wrinkled body in the mirror. There were no marks, but the memory of unspeakable indignities caused his hands to shake, his gorge to rise. Recalling the savagery and pain visited upon him, it was inconceivable his skin, albeit soiled with dirt and unidentifiable stains, showed no bruises or blemishes. He showered in water so hot it nearly scalded him. Finally, he dressed in a fresh suit and fixed a drink. Halfway through the glass he dialed the police and told his name to the lady who answered and that he'd be coming in shortly. He called Wanda's house and left a message informing her of his situation.

The station was largely deserted. An officer on the opposite side of bulletproof glass recorded his information and asked him to take a seat. Pershing slumped in a plastic chair near a pair of soda machines. There were a few empty desks and cubicles in a large room to his left. Periodically a uniformed officer passed by and gave him an uninterested glance.

Eventually, Detective Klecko appeared and shook his hand and ushered him into a small office. The office was papered with memos and photographs of wanted criminals. Brown water stains marred the ceiling tiles and the room smelled moldy. Detective Klecko poured orange soda into a Styrofoam cup and gave it to Pershing and left the can on the edge of the desk. The detective was a large man, with a bushy mustache and powerful hands. He dressed in a white shirt and black suspenders, and his bulk caused the swivel chair to wobble precariously. He smiled broadly and asked if it was all right to turn on a tape recorder—Pershing wasn't being charged, wasn't a suspect, this was just department policy.

They exchanged pleasantries regarding the cooler weather, the Seattle Mariners' disappointing season, and how the city police department was woefully understaffed due to the recession, and segued right into questions about Pershing's tenancy at the Broadsword. How long had he lived there? Who did he know? Who were his friends? Was he friendly with the Ordbeckers, their children? Especially little Eric. Eric was missing, and Mr. Dennard could you please tell me where you've been the last three days?

Pershing couldn't. He sat across from the detective and stared at the recorder and sweated. At last he said, "I drink. I blacked out."

Detective Klecko said, "Really? That might come as a surprise to your friends. They described you as a moderate drinker."

"I'm not saying I'm a lush, only that I down a bit more in private than anybody knows. I hit it pretty hard Monday night and sort of recovered this afternoon."

"That happen often?"

"No."

Detective Klecko nodded and scribbled on a notepad. "Did you happen to see Eric Ordbecker on Monday… before you became inebriated?"

"No, sir. I spent the day in my apartment. You can talk to Melvin Clayton. He lives in 23. We had dinner about five p.m. or so."

The phone on the desk rang. Detective Klecko shut off the recorder and listened, then told whoever was on the other end the interview was almost concluded. "Your wife, Wanda. She's waiting outside. We'll be done in a minute."

"Oh, she's not my wife—"

Detective Klecko started the recorder again. "Continuing interview with Mr. Pershing Dennard… So, Mr. Dennard, you claim not to have seen Eric Ordbecker on Monday, September 24? When was the last time you did see Eric?"

"I'm not claiming anything. I didn't see the kid that day. Last time I saw him? I don't know—two weeks ago, maybe. I was talking to his dad. Let me tell you, you're questioning the wrong person. Don't you have the reports we've made about weirdoes sneaking around the building? You should be chatting them up. The weirdoes, I mean."

"Well, let's not worry about them. Let's talk about you a bit more, shall we?"

And so it went for another two hours. Finally, the detective killed the recorder and thanked him for his cooperation. He didn't think there would be any more questions. Wanda met Pershing in the reception area. She wore one of her serious work dresses and no glasses; her eyes were puffy from

crying. Wrestling with his irritation at seeing her before he'd prepared his explanations, he hugged her and inhaled the perfume in her hair. He noted how dark the station had become. Illumination came from the vending machines and a reading lamp at the desk sergeant's post. The sergeant himself was absent.

"Mr. Dennard?" Detective Klecko stood silhouetted in the office doorway, backlit by his flickering computer monitor.

"Yes, Detective?" *What now? Here come the cuffs, I bet.*

"Thank you again. Don't worry yourself over… what we discussed. We'll take care of everything." His face was hidden, but his eyes gleamed.

The detective's words didn't fully hit Pershing until he'd climbed into Wanda's car and they were driving to Anthony's, an expensive restaurant near the marina. She declared a couple of glasses of wine and a fancy lobster dinner were called for. Not to celebrate, but to restore some semblance of order, some measure of normalcy. She seemed equally, if not more, shaken than he was. That she hadn't summoned the courage to demand where he'd been for three days told him everything about her state of mind.

We'll take care of everything.

15

Wanda parked in the side lot of a darkened bank and went to withdraw cash from the ATM. Pershing watched her from the car, keeping an eye out for lurking muggers. The thought of dinner made his stomach tighten. He didn't feel well. His head ached and chills knotted the muscles along his spine. Exhaustion caused his eyelids to droop.

"Know what I ask myself?" Terry whispered from the vent under the dash. "I ask myself why you never told the cops about the two 'men' who took me away. In all these years, you've not told the whole truth to anyone."

Pershing put his hand over his mouth. "Jesus!"

"Don't weasel. *Answer the question."*

In a gesture he dimly acknowledged as absurd, he almost broke the lever in his haste to close the vent. "Because they didn't exist," he said, more to

convince himself. “When the search parties got to me, I was half-dead from exposure, ranting and raving. You got lost. You just got lost and we couldn’t find you.” He wiped his eyes and breathed heavily.

“You think your visit with us was unpleasant? It was a gift. Pull yourself together. We kept the bad parts from you, Percy my boy. For now, at least. No sniveling; it’s unbecoming in a man your age.”

Pershing composed himself sufficiently to say, “That kid! What did you bastards do? Are you trying to hang me? Haven’t I suffered enough to please you sickos?”

“Like I said; you don’t know the first thing about suffering. Your little friend Eric does, though.”

Wanda faced the car, folding money into her wallet. A shadow detached from the bushes at the edge of the building. Terry rose behind her, his bone-white hand spread like a catcher’s mitt above her head. His fingers tapered to needles. He grinned evilly at Pershing, and made a shushing gesture. From the vent by some diabolical ventriloquism: “We’ll be around. If you need us. Be good.”

Wanda slung open the door and climbed in. She started the engine and kissed Pershing’s cheek. He scarcely noticed; his attention was riveted upon Terry waving as he melted into the shrubbery.

He didn’t touch a thing at dinner. His nerves were shot—a child cried, a couple bickered with a waiter, and boisterous laughter from a neighboring table set his teeth on edge. The dim lighting was provided by candles in bowls and lamps in sconces. He couldn’t even see his own feet through the shadows when he glanced under the table while Wanda had her head turned. The bottle of wine came in handy. She watched in wordless amazement as he downed several consecutive glasses.

That night his dreams were smooth and black as the void.

16

The calendar ticked over into October. Elgin proposed a long weekend at his grandfather’s cabin. He’d bring his latest girlfriend, an Evergreen graduate student named Sarah. Mel and Gina, and Pershing and Wanda

would round out the expedition. “We all could use a day or two away from the bright lights,” Elgin said. “Drink some booze, play some cards, tell a few tales around the bonfire. It’ll be a hoot.”

Pershing would have happily begged off. He was irritable as a badger. More than ever he wanted to curl into a ball and make his apartment a den, no trespassers allowed. On the other hand, he’d grown twitchier by the day. Shadows spooked him. Being alone spooked him. There’d been no news about the missing child and he constantly waited for the other shoe to drop. The idea of running into Mark Ordbecker gave him acid. He prayed the Ordbeckers had focused their suspicion on the real culprits and would continue to leave him in peace.

Ultimately he consented to the getaway for Wanda’s sake. She’d lit up at the mention of being included on this most sacred of annual events. It made her feel that she’d been accepted as a member of the inner circle.

Late Friday afternoon, the six of them loaded food, extra clothes, and sleeping bags into two cars and headed for the hills. It was an hour’s drive that wound from Olympia through the nearby pastureland of the Waddell Valley toward the Black Hills. Elgin paced them as they climbed a series of gravel and dirt access roads into the high country. Even after all these years, Pershing was impressed by how quickly the trappings of civilization were erased as the forest closed in. Few people came this far—mainly hunters and hikers passing through. Several logging camps were located in the region, but none within earshot.

Elgin’s cabin lay at the end of an overgrown track atop a ridge. Below, the valley spread in a misty gulf. At night, Olympia’s skyline burned orange in the middle distance. No phone, no television, no electricity. Water came from a hand pump. There was an outhouse in the woods behind the cabin. While everyone else unpacked the cars, Pershing and Mel fetched wood from the shed and made a big fire in the pit near the porch, and a second fire in the massive stone hearth inside the cabin. By then it was dark.

Wanda and Gina turned the tables on the men and demonstrated their superior barbequing skills. Everyone ate hot dogs and drank Löwenbräu and avoided gloomy conversation until Sarah commented that Elgin’s cabin

would be “a great place to wait out the apocalypse” and received nervous chuckles in response.

Pershing smiled to cover the prickle along the back of his neck. He stared into the night and wondered what kind of apocalypse a kid like Sarah imagined when she used that word. Probably she visualized the polar icecaps melting, or the world as a desert. Pershing’s generation had lived in fear of the Reds, nuclear holocaust, and being invaded by little green men from Mars.

Wind sighed in the trees and sent a swirl of sparks tumbling skyward. He trembled. *I hate the woods. Who thought the day would come?* Star fields twinkled across the millions of light years. He didn’t like the looks of them either. Wanda patted his arm and laid her head against his shoulder while Elgin told an old story about the time he and his college dorm mates replaced the school flag with a pair of giant pink bloomers.

Pershing didn’t find the story amusing this time. The laughter sounded canned and made him consider the artificiality of the entire situation, man’s supposed mastery of nature and darkness. Beyond this feeble bubble of light yawned a chasm. He’d drunk more than his share these past few days; had helped himself to Wanda’s Valium. None of these measures did the trick of allowing him to forget where he’d gone or what he’d seen; it hadn’t convinced him that his worst memories were the products of nightmare. Wanda’s touch repulsed him, confined him. He wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and hide beneath the covers until everything bad went away.

It grew chilly and the bonfire died to coals. The others drifted off to sleep. The cabin had two bedrooms—Elgin claimed one, and as the married couple, Mel and Gina were awarded the second. Pershing and Wanda settled for an air mattress near the fireplace. When the last of the beer was gone, he extricated himself from her and rose to stretch. “I’m going inside,” he said. She smiled and said she’d be along soon. She wanted to watch the stars a bit longer.

Pershing stripped to his boxers and lay on the air mattress. He pulled the blanket to his chin and stared at the rafters. His skin was clammy and it itched fiercely. Sharp, throbbing pains radiated from his knees and

shoulders. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes. He remembered the day he'd talked to Mark Ordbecker, the incredible heat, young Eric's terrified expression as he skulked behind his father. Little pitchers and big ears. The boy heard the voices crooning from below, hadn't he?

A purple ring of light flickered on the rough-hewn beam directly overhead. It pulsed and blurred with each thud of his heart. The ring shivered like water and changed. His face was damp, but not from tears, not from sweat. He felt his knuckle joints split, the skin and meat popping and peeling like an overripe banana. What had Terry said about eating the young and immortality?

How does our species propagate, you may ask. Cultural assimilation, my friend. We chop out the things that make you lesser life forms weak and then pump you full of love. You'll be part of the family soon; you'll understand everything.

A mental switch clicked and he smiled at the memory of creeping into Eric's room and plucking him from his bed; later, the child's hands fluttering, nerveless, the approving croaks and cries of his new kin. He shuddered in ecstasy and burst crude seams in a dozen places. He threw off the blanket and stood, swaying, drunk with revelation. His flesh was a chrysalis, leaking gore.

Terry and Gloria watched him from the doorways of the bedrooms—naked and ghostly, and smiling like devils. Behind them, the rooms were silent. He looked at their bodies, contemptuous that anyone could be fooled for two seconds by these distorted forms, or by his own.

Then he was outside under the cold, cold stars.

Wanda huddled in her shawl, wan and small in the firelight. Finally she noticed him, tilting her head so she could meet his eyes. "Sweetie, are you waiting for me?" She gave him a concerned smile. The recent days of worry and doubt had deepened the lines of her brow. "Good Lord—are you naked?"

He regarded her from the shadows, speechless as his mouth filled with blood. He touched his face, probing a moist seam just beneath the hairline; a fissure, a fleshy zipper. Near his elbow, Terry said, "The first time, it's easier if you just snatch it off."

Pershing gripped the flap of skin. He swept his hand down and ripped away all the frailties of humanity.

The Redfield Girls

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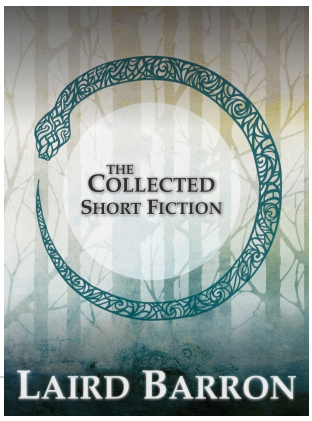

1

Every autumn for a decade, several of the Redfield Girls, a close knit sorority of veteran teachers from Redfield Memorial Middle School in Olympia, gathered for a minor road trip along the hinterlands of the Pacific Northwest. Traditionally, they rented a house in a rural, picturesque locale, such as the San Juan Islands or Cannon Beach, or Astoria, and settled in for a last long weekend of cribbage, books, and wine before their students came rushing into the halls, flushed and wild from summer vacation. Bernice Barber; Karla Gott; Dixie Thiess; and Li-Hua Ming comprised the core of the Redfield Girls. Li-Hua served as the school psychiatrist, and Karla and Dixie taught English—Karla was a staunch, card bearing member of the Dead White Guys Club, while Dixie preferred Neruda and Borges. Their frequent arguments were excruciating or exquisite depending on how many glasses of merlot they'd downed. Both of them considered Bernice, the lone science teacher and devourer of clearance sale textbooks, a borderline stick in the mud. They meant this with great affection.

This was Bernice's year to choose their destination and she chose a rustic cabin on the shores of Lake Crescent on the Olympic Peninsula. The cabin belonged to the Bigfish Lodge and was situated a half mile from the main road in a stand of firs. There was no electricity, or indoor plumbing, although the building itself was rather comfortable and spacious and the caretakers kept the woodshed stocked. The man on the phone told her a lot of celebrities had stayed there—Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Elizabeth Taylor, and at least one of the Kennedys. Even some mobsters and their molls.

Truth be told, Dixie *nagged* her into picking the lake. Left to her own devices, she would've happily settled for another weekend at Ocean Shores or Seaside. Dixie was having none of it: ever fascinated with the Port Angeles and the Sequim Valley, she pushed and pushed, and Bernice finally gave in. Her family homesteaded in the area during the 1920s, although most of them had scattered on the wind long since. She'd lived in Olympia since childhood, but Dad and Mom brought them up to the lake for a visit during the height of every summer. They pitched a tent at a campsite in the nearby park, and fished and swam in the lake. Dad barbequed and told ghost stories, because that's what one did when one spent a long, lonely night near the water. Bernice and her husband Elmer made a half dozen day trips over the years; none, however, since he passed away. Lately though, she thought of the lake often. She woke in a sweat, dreams vanishing like quicksilver.

The night before the Redfield Girls were to leave on the trip, there was a storm. She was startled by loud knocking on the front door. She hesitated to answer, and briefly lamented not adopting another big dog for protection after her black Lab Norman died. Living alone on a piece of wooded property outside of town, she seldom received random visitors—and certainly not in the wee hours. A familiar voice shouted her name. Her teenage niece Lourdes Blanchard had flown in unannounced from Paris.

Bernice ushered Lourdes inside, doing her best to conceal her annoyance. She enjoyed kids well enough. However, she jealously coveted those few weeks of freedom between summer and fall, and more importantly, her relationship with Lourdes was cool. The girl was bright and possessed a wry wit. Definitely not a prized combination in anyone under thirty.

Bernice suspected trouble at home. Her sister Nancy denied it during the livid, yet surreptitious phone call Bernice made after she'd tucked the girl into bed. Everything was fine, absolutely super—why was she asking? Lourdes saved a bit of money and decided to hop the international flight from Paris to Washington State, determined to embark upon a fandango of sorts. What was a mother to do? The child was stubborn as a mule—just like her favorite Auntie.

"Well, you could've warned me," for starters, Bernice said. "Good God, Nance, I'm leaving with the Redfield Girls tomorrow—"

Nancy laughed as the connection crackled. “See, that’s perfect. She’s been clamoring to go with you on one of your little adventures. Sis? Sis? I’m losing the connection. Have fun—”

She was left clutching a dead phone. The timing was bizarre and seemed too eerie for coincidence. She’d had awful dreams several nights running; now, here was Lourdes on her doorstep, soaked to the bone, thunder and lightning at her back. It was almost as bad as the gothic horror novels Bernice had been reading to put herself to sleep. She couldn’t very well send Lourdes packing, nor with any conscience leave her sitting at the house. So, she gritted her teeth into a Miss America smile and said, “Guess what, kid? We’re going to the mountains.”

2

The group arrived at the lake in late afternoon. Somehow, they’d managed to jam themselves, and all their luggage, into Dixie’s rusted out Subaru. The car was a hundred thousand miles past its expiration date and plastered with stickers like FREE TIBET, KILL YOUR TV, and VISUALIZE WHIRLED PEAS. They stopped at the lodge and picked up the cabin key and a complimentary fruit basket. From there it was a ten minute drive through the woods to the cabin itself. While the others finished unpacking, Bernice slipped outside to sneak a cigarette. To her chagrin, Lourdes was waiting, elbows on the rail. Her niece was rapidly becoming a bad penny. Annoyingly, the other women didn’t seem to mind her crashing the party. Perhaps their empty nests made them maudlin for the company of children.

“Aunt Dolly died here. This is where they found her.” Lourdes squinted at the dark water thirty or so yards from the porch of the cabin.

“That’s great aunt to you.” Bernice quickly pocketed her lighter and tried to figure how to beat a hasty retreat without appearing to flee the scene. “To be accurate, it probably happened closer to the western side. That’s where they lived.”

“But, she was the *Lady of the Lake*?”

“Aunt Dolly was Aunt Dolly. She died an awful death. Cue the violins.”

“And the ghost stories.”

“Those too. Nothing like enriching cultural heritage by giving the tavern drunks a *cause celebre* to flap their lips about.”

“Doesn’t it make you sad? Even a little?”

“I wasn’t alive in 1938. Jeez—I never knew the gal personally. How old do you think I am, anyway?”

Lourdes brushed back her hair. She was straw blonde and lean, although she had her mother’s eyes and mouth. Bernice had always wondered about the girl’s fairness. On the maternal side, their great grandparents were a heavy mix of Spanish and Klallam—just about everybody in the immediate family was thick and dark. Bernice had inherited high cheekbones and bronze skin and black hair, now turning to iron. She owned a pair of moccasins she never wore, and a collection of beads handed down from her elders she kept locked in a box of similar trinkets.

A stretch of beach separated them and the lake. The lake was a scar one mile wide and ten miles long. The water splashed against the rocks, tossing reels of brown kelp. Clouds rolled across the sky. The sun was sinking and the water gleamed black with streaks of red. Night came early to the Peninsula in the fall. The terrain conspired with the dark. For the most part, one couldn’t see a thing after sundown. The Douglas Fir and Western Redwoods rose like ancient towers, and beneath the canopy all was cool and dim. Out there, simple homes were scattered through the foothills of Storm King Mountain in a chain of dirt tracks that eventually linked to the highway junction. This was logging country, farm country; field and stream, and overgrown woods full of nothing but birds and deer, and the occasional lost camper.

An owl warbled and Bernice shivered. “Anyway. How’d this gnat get in your ear?”

“I read about it a long time ago in a newspaper clipping—I was helping Grandma sort through Grandpa’s papers after he died. As we drove up here, I started thinking about the story. This place is so… forbidding. I mean, it’s gorgeous, but beneath that, kind of stark. And… Dixie was telling me about it earlier when you were getting the key.”

“That figures.”

The younger woman pulled her shawl tight. “It’s just so… awful.”

“You said it, kid.” Bernice called her niece “kid” even though Lourdes was seventeen and on her way to college in a couple of weeks. Depending upon the results of forthcoming exams, she’d train to be a magistrate, or at the least, a barrister. They grew up fast in Europe. Even so, the divide was too broad—Bernice was approaching fifty and she felt every mile in her bones. Chaperone to a sardonic, provocative little wiseacre seemed a hollow reward for another tough year at the office.

“There’s another thing… I had a really bizarre dream about Aunt Dolly the other day. I was floating in a lake—not here, but somewhere warm—and she spoke to me. She was this white shape under the water. I knew it was her, though, and I heard her voice clearly.”

“What did she say?”

“I don’t remember. She was nice… except, something about the situation wasn’t right, you know? Like she was trying to trick me. I woke in a sweat.”

Bernice’s flesh goose pimpled. Uncertain how to respond, she resisted the temptation to confide her own nightmares. “That is pretty weird, all right.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask about the murder,” Lourdes said.

“But not quite, eh?” They must be sharing a wavelength. What wavelength, though?

“I wish Mom had mentioned it.”

“It’s quite the campfire tale with your cousins. Grandpa Howard used to scare them with it every Halloween—”

“Way insensitive.”

“Well, that’s the other side of the family. Kissinger he isn’t. Nancy never told you?”

“Frank discourages loose talk. He’s a sensible fellow. Mom follows his lead.” It was no secret Lourdes disliked her father. His name was Francois, but she called him Frank when talking to her friends. She’d pierced her navel and tattooed the US flag on the small of her back to spite him. Ironically, his stepsons John and Frank, thought Francois was the greatest thing since sliced baguettes.

Fair enough, if she hated him. Who knew what Nancy was thinking when she married the schmuck. Except, Bernice *did indeed* know what her sister had been thinking—Francois was a first rate civil engineer; one of the best in Paris. After Bill died, Nancy only cared about security. Her two boys were in middle school at the time and Bill had been under the weight of a crippling mortgage, the bills for his chemotherapy. Bernice suspected she only got herself pregnant with Lourdes to seal the deal. It shouldn't irk her that Nancy had made the smart choice. When Bernice lost Elmer, she'd gone the other direction—dug in and accepted the role of widow. Eleven years and she hadn't remarried, hadn't even gone on a date. It was wrong to begrudge Nancy, but Lord help her, she did, and maybe that was why she resented poor Lourdes just a tiny bit—and maybe she was envious because she and Elmer put off having their own children and now it was far too late.

Lourdes said, "That's why you brought us up here, right? To tell the tale and give everyone a good scare?"

Bernice laughed to cover her mounting unease. "It hadn't occurred to me. I brought a bag of books and sun block. We've got our evening cribbage tournaments. Hope you don't get too bored with us biddies."

"Dixie promised to go hiking with me tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Bernice detested hiking. The hills were steep, the bugs ravenous. She'd allowed her gym membership to lapse, and piled on almost fifteen pounds since spring. No, hiking wasn't a welcome prospect. And to think she wasn't even consulted in the change of program. Dixie's treachery would not go unremarked.

"Tomorrow afternoon. Then she's driving us into Port Angeles for dinner at the Red Devil."

"That's a bar. Your parents—"

"The place serves fish and chips. Dixie says it's the best cod ever. Besides, there's no drinking age in France."

"Cripes," Bernice said. Her desire for a cigarette was almost violent, but she restricted herself to a couple of *Virginia Slims* a day, and only in secret. Lights came on in the cabin. Dixie stuck her head out a window to say dinner was up.

3

Li-Hua made stir fry and egg rolls over the gas range. She preferred traditional southern Chinese cuisine. A tough, sinewy woman, she'd endured a stint in a tire factory during the Cultural Revolution before escaping to college, and eventually from Hainan to the United States where she earned her doctorate. For years, Karla nagged her to write a memoir that would make Amy Tan seem like a piker. Li-Hua smiled wisely and said she'd probably retire and open a restaurant instead.

They ate garlic bread on the side and drank plenty of red wine Karla and her husband Chuck had brought home from a recent tour of Wenatchee vineyards. Normally the couple spent summer vacation scuba diving in Puget Sound. As Karla explained, "We went to the wineries because I've gotten too fat to fit into my wetsuit."

After dinner, Dixie turned down the kerosene lanterns and the five gathered near the hearth—Bernice and Li-Hua in the musty leather seats; Karla, Dixie, and Lourdes on their sleeping bags. The AM transistor played soft, classical jazz. Karla quizzed Lourdes about her dreaded exams, the pros and cons of European track education versus the American scattershot approach.

Bernice half-listened to their conversation, wineglass balanced on her knee, as she lazily scrutinized the low, split beam rafters, the stuffed mallard and elk head trophies, and the dingy photographs of manly men posing beside hewn logs and mounds of slaughtered salmon. Darkness filled every window.

"You want to tell this?" Dixie said. "Your niece is pestering me."

"I know. She's been bugging the crap out of me, too."

"Oh, be nice, would you?" Karla said. She stirred the coals with a poker.

"Yeah, be nice," Dixie said while Lourdes didn't try hard to cover a smirk. Her cheeks were flushed. Dixie and Karla had given her a few glasses of wine. "Hey, they do it in France!" Dixie said when confronted.

"Go for it, then." Bernice shook her head. She was too drowsy and worn down to protest. She always enjoyed Dixie's rendition of the tale. Her friend once wrote an off the cuff essay called *Haunted Lake.* It was

subsequently published in the *Daily Olympian* and reprinted every couple of years around Halloween.

"If you insist."

"Hey, guys," Li-Hua said. "It may be bad luck to gossip about this so close to the sacred water."

"Come on," Dixie said.

Li-Hua frowned. "I'm serious. My feet got cold when you started talking. What if the spirits heard us and now they're watching? You don't know everything about these things. There are terrible mysteries."

"Whatever," Bernice said. She refused to admit the same chill creeping up her legs, as if dipped in a mist of dry ice. "Let nothing but fear…"

"Okie-dokie. What's so special about the lake?" Karla dropped the poker and leaned toward Dixie with an expression of dubious interest.

"She's cursed." Dixie was solemn.

"That's what I'm saying," Li-Hua said.

"I get the feeling you Northlanders brought a lot of superstitious baggage from the Old World," Karla said, indicating Dixie's pronounced Norwegian ancestry.

"It's more than white man superstition, though. In the winter, thunderstorms boil down the valley, set fire to the high timber, tear the roofs off houses, and flood a hundred draws from here to Port Townsend." Dixie nodded to herself and sipped her drink, beginning to get into her narrative. "The wind *blows*. It lays its hammer on the waters of the lake, beats her until she bares rows of whitecap teeth. She's old too, that one; a deep, dark Paleolithic well of glacial water. She was here an eon before the Klallam settled along the valley in their huts and longhouses. The tribes never liked her. According to legend, the Klallam refused to paddle their canoes across Lake Crescent. This goes back to the ancient days when the Klallam were paddling just about everywhere. They believed the lake was full of demons who would drag them to bottom for trespassing."

A gust rattled the windows and moaned in the chimney. Sparks flew around the grate and everybody but Dixie glanced into the shadowy corners of the room.

“Man, you’re getting good at this,” Bernice said dryly.

“Keep going!” Lourdes said. She’d pulled her sweater over her nose so that only her eyes were revealed.

“I’d be quiet,” Li-Hua said.

Dixie chuckled and handed her glass to Li-Hua. Li-Hua poured her another three fingers of wine and passed it back. “Oh, the locals *adore* stories—the eerie ones, the true crime ones, the ones that poke at the unknowable; and they do love their gossip. Everybody, and I mean everybody, has a favorite. The most famous tale you’ll hear about Lake Crescent concerns the murder of poor waitress Dolly Hanson. Of all the weird stories, the morbid campfire tales they tell the tourists on stormy nights around the hearth, *The Lady of the Lake Murder* is the one everybody remembers.

“A tawdry piece of business, that saga. In the mid-’30s, the bar had grown into a popular resort for the rich townies and renamed Lake Crescent Lodge, although most of the locals stubbornly referred to it as Singer’s Tavern. A few still do. According to legend, Dolly, who was Bernice’s aunt, of course, had just gotten divorced from her third husband Hank on account of his philandering ways—”

“—And the fact he beat her within an inch of her life whenever he got a snootful at the tavern,” Bernice said.

“Yes, yes,” Dixie said. “On the morning of the big Singer’s Christmas party of 1938, he strangled Dolly, tied some blocks to her and dumped her in the middle of the lake. The jerk went about his way as the resident merry widower of Port Angeles until he eventually moved to California. People suspected, people whispered, but Hank claimed his wife ran off to Alaska with a salesman—or a sailor, depending on who’s telling the tale—and no one could prove otherwise.”

“Some fishermen found her in 1945, washed up directly below the lodge. That lake is deep and cold—there aren’t any deeper or any colder in the continental US. The frigid alkaline water preserved Dolly pretty much fully intact. She’d turned to soap.”

“Soap? Like a soap carving, a sculpture?”

“Yes indeed. The cold caused a chemical reaction that softens the body, yet keeps it intact to point. A weird sort of mummification.”

“That’s freaky,” Lourdes said.

Dixie chuckled. “Say, Bernie—wasn’t it Bob Hall, who identified her? Yeah… Hall. A barber by trade, and part time dentist, matched her dental records. The young lady’s teeth were perfectly preserved, you see. That was curtains for old two-timing Hank. He was hanged in ’49. That’s just one incident. Plenty more where that came from.”

“More murders? More soap mummies?” Karla said.

“I suppose there could be more corpses. Deep as she is, the lake would make a pretty convenient dump site. Folks are given to feuds here in the hills. A lot of people have disappeared from this end of the Peninsula over the years. Especially around the lake.”

“Really? Like who?”

“All kinds. There was the married couple who bought a washing machine in Sequim and were last seen a mile or so from where we are right now. Those two vanished in 1955 and it’s still a mystery where they went. Back in 2005, an amateur detective supposedly found the lid to the washer in two hundred feet of water near a swimming hole called The Devil’s Punch Bowl. The kid got pretty excited about his find; he planned to come back with more equipment and volunteers, but he hasn’t, and I doubt he will. It wouldn’t matter anyway. Then there’s Ambulance Point. An ambulance racing for the hospital crashed through a guardrail and went into the drink. The paramedics swam away from the wreck, but a logger strapped to a gurney in the back of the ambulance sure as hell didn’t. Every year some diver uncovers the door handle to a Model A, the bumper from a Packard, the rims to something else. Bones? Undoubtedly, a reef of them exists somewhere in the deep. We won’t find them, though. Like the old timers say: the mistress keeps those close to her heart. Some say the souls of those taken are imprisoned in the forms of animals—coyotes and loons. When a coyote howls or a loon screams, they’re crying to their old selves, the loved ones they’ve lost.”

Lourdes’s eyes were wide and gleaming. “You actually wrote an essay about this?”

“Yep.”

“You must email it to me when I get home!”

“You got it kiddo.”

Bernice was getting ready to turn in for the night when Dixie laughed with Lourdes and said, “That’s a great idea. Bernie, you in?”

“On what?”

“A seance.”

“I’ve studied the occult,” Lourdes said with a self-conscious flush. “I know how to do this.”

“Black magic an elective across the pond, is it?”

“No, me and some friends just play around with it for fun.”

“She looks so normal, too,” Bernice said to Karla and Li-Hua.

Li-Hua shook her head. “Forget about it. No way.”

“I’m game,” Karla said. “I attended a couple of seances in college. It’s harmless. What night could be better?”

“Think of the memories,” Dixie said. “When’s the last time we’ve done anything wild?”

“Yeah, but you go to El Salvador while we effete gentry glut ourselves and sail around on yachts during summer vacation,” Karla said. “Don’t the locals believe in ghosts and such? Surely you see funky goings on?”

“From a distance. I’m not exactly brave.”

“Pshaw. No way I could stomach the dozen inoculations you’ve gotta get to enter those countries. Nope, I’m white bread to the core.”

“Well, I’m with Li-Hua. I’m tired and it’s silly anyway.” Bernice stood and went out to the porch. The wind ripped across the water and roared through the trees. She shielded her eyes from a blast of leaves and pine needles. Her hair came free of its barrette and she wondered how crazy that made her appear. Getting in a nightcap smoke was out of the question. She gave up, all but consumed with irritability. Her mood didn’t improve when she slammed the door and threw the bolt and discovered Dixie, Karla, and Lourdes cross legged in a semicircle on the floor.

Li-Hua had crawled into her bunk and sat in shadow, her arms folded. She patted the covers. “Quick, over here. Don’t bother with them.”

Bernice joined her friend. The two shared a blanket as the fire had diminished to fading coals and the room was colder by the moment. “This is simply…” she struggled for words. On one hand, the whole seance idea was unutterably juvenile—yet juxtaposed with her recent bout of nerves, the ominous locale, and the sudden storm, it gained weight, a sinister gravity. Finally, she said, “This is foolish,” and was immediately struck by the double meaning of the word.

Ultimately, the ritual proved anticlimactic. Lourdes invoked the spirits of Aunt Dolly and others who’d drowned in the lake, inviting them to signal their presence, which of course they may or may not have done as it was difficult to discern much over the clattering shutters and the wind screeching in the eaves. Dixie, head bowed, almost fell over as she nodded off, eliciting chuckles from all present.

Things began to wind down after that. The cabin was quite warm and cozy and the wine did its trick to induce drowsiness. Again Bernice had decided not to mention her recent bad dreams that revolved around drowning and the ghost of her aunt bobbing to the surface of the lake like a bloated ice cube, then skating across the water, her face black as the occulted moon. Dixie would’ve laughed and said something about zombie ballerinas, while Karla raised an eyebrow and warned her to lay off the booze. Worst of all, Li-Hua was likely to take it seriously. *So, you’ve returned to face your childhood demons. Good for you*! No, no, no—far better to keep her mouth shut.

She fell asleep and dreamed of sinking into icy water, of drifting helplessly as a white figure crowned in a Medusa snarl of hair reached for her. In the instant before she snapped awake tearing at her blankets and gasping for air, she saw her sister’s face.

4

Unhappily—so far as Bernice was concerned—they did indeed embark upon a hike along the cluttered beach directly after breakfast. The Redfield Girls had the shore to themselves, although there were a few small boats on

the lake. The sky was flat and gray. It sprinkled occasionally, and a stiff breeze chopped the surface of the water. They picked their way until reaching the farthest point on the north side where a stream rushed over jumbled stones; shaggy bushes and low-hanging alders formed an impenetrable screen between shore and deep forest.

The women rested for a bit in a patch of golden light sifted from a knothole in the clouds. Bernice pulled off her shoe and poured out pebbles and sand, and scowled at the blister already puffing on her ankle.

"Don't tell me you thought we'd let you lead us to God's swimming hole and then hibernate all weekend." Dixie sat beside her on a log.

"That's precisely what I thought."

"Silly woman. Hiking is f-u-u-n!"

"Look at this damned thing on my foot and say that again."

Lourdes and Karla skipped pebbles across the water and laughed. Li-Hua came over and stared at Bernice's blister. "Maybe we should pop it? Let me."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know, to drain the pus."

"For the love of—that's not what you do with a blister," Bernice said. She quickly stuck her shoe on before Li-Hua got any more ideas.

"Yeah, that's crazy talk. You just want to try one of your ancient herbal remedies and see if it works, or if her foot swells like a melon."

Li-Hua shrugged and grinned. She didn't think much of Western medicine, this prejudice exacerbated by complications stemming from her hysterectomy conducted at Saint Peter's Hospital. Her own grandmother had been an apothecary and lived in perfect health to one hundred and three.

"My husband knew an old fisherman who lived here." Li-Hua's husband Hung worked for the state as a cultural researcher. He'd assisted on a demographical study of the region and spent several weeks among the Klallam, and Norwegian and Dutch immigrants who'd lived nearby for decades. "Job Nilsson had a ramshackle cabin over one of these ridges.

After Hung interviewed him, we brought him cases of canned goods and other supplies every winter until he passed away. It was sad."

"Yeesh," Dixie said. She'd gone to El Salvador and Nicaragua on many humanitarian missions. "I never knew, Li-Hua. You guys are wonderful." She sprang from her perch and hugged Li-Hua.

"Job wouldn't talk about the lake much. He stopped fishing here in 1973 and went to the river instead. He believed what the Klallam said—that demons were in here, swimming around, watching for intruders. He said most white people believed it was mainly ghosts of those who drowned haunted this place, but he thought that was wrong. Only a few corrupted souls linger here on Earth. Or a few who get lost and forget who they are. The rest go to their reward, or punishment."

"Uh-huh," Bernice said. This conversation brought back the creepy feelings. She was frightened and that kindled the helpless anger, again.

"The spirits are great deceivers. They delight in causing pain and fear. Of course, the spirits are angry about the houses, the motor boats, the trash, and seek to lure anyone they can and drown them."

Bernice shook her head. "Last night you groused at us for telling tales. Now look at you go…"

"The cat is out of the bag."

"Huh. Maybe you should put it *back* in the bag."

"That it? The codger was superstitious?" Dixie lighted a cigarette and Bernice's mouth watered.

"His brother Caleb drowned in the Devil's Punch Bowl. Four people saw him fall into the water and disappear. The body was lost, but Job claimed to meet something pretending to be his brother a year later. He was walking along the beach and saw him lying under a pile of driftwood. Job ran toward his brother's corpse, but when he reached it, Caleb sprang from the weeds and slithered into the water, laughing. Job was terrified when he realized the figure didn't really resemble his brother at all. And that's why he stopped fishing here."

"I hope he gave up on moonshine too," Bernice said.

Lourdes was the one who spotted the rowboat. It lay grounded on the beach, partially obscured by a tangle of driftwood just below their cabin. The women gathered around and peeked inside. Nothing seemed amiss—the oars were stowed and only a pail or two of rainwater slopped beneath the floorboards.

“It’s a rental,” Dixie said. “The lodges around here rent skiffs and canoes. Somebody forgot to tie it to the dock.”

“I don’t think so,” Bernice said. The boat was weathered, its boards slightly warped, tinged green and gray. “This thing looks old.” Actually, ancient might’ve been more accurate. It smelled of algae and wood rot.

“Yeah. Older than Andy Griffith,” Karla said.

“Maybe it belongs to one of the locals.”

“Anything’s possible. We’ll tell the lodge. Let them sort it out.” Dixie tied the mooring rope to a half-buried stump and off they went.

5

They stopped at the Bigfish to report the abandoned boat and use the showers, then drove into Port Angeles for dinner at the Red Devil. When they returned a few hours later, the moon was rising. Bernice and Karla lugged in wood for the fire. Li-Hua fixed hot chocolate and they drank it on the porch.

“The boat’s still here,” Lourdes said, indicating its dark bulk against the shining sliver of beach.

“Ah, they’ll come get it in the morning,” Bernice said. “Or not. Who cares.”

“I know!” Dixie clapped for attention. “Let’s take it for a spin.”

“A spin? That would imply the existence of an outboard motor,” Karla said.

“Yes, but we’ll just use the manual override. It comes with oars.”

“I’ve stuffed my face with entirely too much lobster to take that suggestion seriously.”

“Don’t look at me,” Bernice said. “I mean it, Dix. Stop looking at me.”

A few minutes later she and Lourdes were helping Dixie shove off. Li-Hua and Karla waved from the shore, steadily shrinking to a pair of smudges as Dixie pulled on the oars. “Isn’t this great?” she said.

Bernice perched in the bow, soon mesmerized by the slap of the oar blades dipping into the glassy surface, their steady creak in the metal eye rings. The boat surged forward and left the rising mist in tatters. She was disquieted by the sensation of floating over a Hadal gulf, an insect prey to gargantuan forms lurking in the depths.

Dixie slogged midway to the far shore, then dropped the oars and let the boat drift. “Owwwie! That did it. Shoulda brought my driving gloves.” She blew on her hands. “No worries. Bernie, ol’ chum, how about “bailing” us out here?”

“Dream on. This is your baby.”

“Omigod, we’ll be doomed to cruise these waters for eternity!”

“I’ll do it,” said Lourdes. The boat tipped precariously as she and Dixie switched places. “So, what do I do?” Dixie gave her a few pointers, and in moments they listed homeward, lurching drunkenly as Lourdes struggled to find her rhythm.

“We’re going to capsize,” Bernice said, only half joking as their wake churned and spray from the oars wet her hair.

“Uh oh,” Dixie said.

“What uh oh?” Bernice said. The cabin was growing larger. She looked down again and water was rapidly filling the boat. Dixie was already ankle deep and bailing like mad with a small plastic bucket. “Good grief! It’s the plug.” All boats were fitted with a plug to drain bilge water when drydocked. She scrambled aft, catching an oar in the shin. She plunged her arm to the elbow, felt around, searching for the hole, and found it, plug firmly in place.

Bubbles roiled about Lourdes’s feet. “Guys…” She dropped the oars. Rowing was impossible now as the boat wallowed.

“Oh crap on a stick! I think it’s coming apart!”

“We gotta swim for it,” Dixie said. She’d already kicked off her shoes. “C’mon Bernie—get ready.”

The shore was about seventy yards away. Not so far, but Bernie hadn't swum a lap in years. Her arms and legs cramped with fear, and the darkness swelled and throbbed in her brain. She tasted the remnants of dinner as acid.

Dixie leaped. Lourdes followed an instant later. She stumbled, and she belly flopped. Water gushed over the rails and the boat was a stone headed for the bottom. Bernie held her nose and jumped—the frigid water slammed her kidneys like a fist. She gasped and kicked, thrashing as if through quicksand, and her clothes dragged, made, abruptly, of concrete. In those moments of hyperawareness, she had time to regret all of the cigarettes and booze, to lament spending her days off lying around the yard like a slug. The moon hung too low; it merged with the lake until water and sky reversed. She floundered, trying to orient herself in the great, dark space.

"Lourdes!" She swallowed water and it scorched her sinuses and throat. "Lourdes!" Her voice didn't project, and she began to cough. There was Dixie bobbing like a cork a few yards away, but no sign of her niece. The blaze of moonlight was eclipsed by red and black motes that shot from the corners of her eyes as she gulped air and dove.

On the first try, she found Lourdes in the freezing murk. The girl was feebly making for the surface. Bernice caught the girl's arm, began to tow her along. A distinct point of light flickered at her peripheral vision. It rose swiftly from blackness, so pale it shone as it tumbled toward her, rushed toward her, and gained size and substance. Bernice gazed upon the approaching form with abject wonder. Perhaps she'd fallen into the sky and was plunging toward the moon itself. Terror overcame her—she screamed and a gout of bubbles exploded from her mouth. She brought Lourdes to the surface in one convulsive heave, and then hands hooked beneath her arms and brought her away with them.

Later, in the fetal position upon the small, sharp rocks of the beach, and after Karla shoved the others aside and administered first aid until she spluttered and vomited and breathed on her own, Bernice tried to summon an image of the form she'd seen down there, to perfect its features, and couldn't. Even now, safely ashore and encircled by her comrades, the blurry figure was etched in her mind, and evoked a stark and abiding fear. It had come close, radiating a cold much sharper than the chill water. She

squeezed her eyes shut, and rubbed them with her palms in a futile attempt to exorcise this image that had leaked from dreams into the physical world.

Dixie and Li-Hua implored her to go to the clinic. What if she was hypothermic? Bernice shrugged them off—after she regained her senses and hacked the water from her lungs, she felt fine. Weak and shivery, but fine. Lourdes was okay, too, probably better, insomuch as youth seemed to bounce back from anything short of bullet wounds. She huddled with Bernice, eager to relate her tale of near disaster. Her pants cuff had snagged on the rail and she banged her shoulder. Thank the stars for Aunt Bernice and Dixie!

"Guess I owe you one, too," Bernice said as Dixie wrapped her in a blanket and led her to the cabin.

"Not me," Dixie said. "No way I coulda dragged your carcass all the way in on my own. You should've seen Karla go—that old broad can *swim*!"

6

Karla and Li-Hua suggested pulling stakes and heading home early in light of the traumatic events. Lourdes disappeared outside and Dixie lay in her bunk, inconsolable for cajoling her friends to accompany her on the rickety boat and then nearly getting them all drowned. "I really fouled up," she said. Her voice was rusty from crying into her pillow. "What a jerk I am."

"We should sue the pants off the lodge for owning such a damned leaky boat!" Karla's had huffed and puffed her indignation for a good hour.

"We took the boat without asking, didn't we?" Li-Hua said.

"That's beside the point. It's outrageous to keep a death trap lying around. Somebody should give them what for."

Bernice forced herself to rise and go for a walk down to the beach where she smoked a cigarette and watched the sun rise while the moon yet glowed on the horizon. She stubbed the butt of her cigarette on the sole of her shoe. Her eyes were twitchy and dry and her hair was stiff. She shook her fist at the lake, and spat.

Lourdes stepped from the bushes screening the path and came to stand beside her. The girl's expression was different today, more sober; she'd

aged five years overnight. The patronizing half smile was wiped from her face. “That is the coldest water I’ve ever jumped into,” she said. “I dreamt about this before.”

“You mean the boat sinking?” Bernice couldn’t look at her.

“Kind of. Not the boat; other stuff. We were somewhere in the woods—here, I guess. Me, you, some other people, I don’t remember. You kept telling the story about Dolly.”

“Except I didn’t tell the story. Dixie did. She’s always been better at talking.”

“I got it wrong. Dreams are funny like that. Mom thinks I’m a psychic. Maybe I’m only a partial psychic.”

“Your psychic powers convince you to fly over here?”

Lourdes shrugged. “I didn’t really analyze it. I just wanted to come see you. It may sound dumb, but on some level I was worried you might be in trouble if I didn’t. Looks like I had it backwards, huh?”

Bernice didn’t say anything for a while. She watched the water shift from black, to milk, to gold. “I’ve always had a bit of the sight, too,” she said.

“Really?”

“Sometimes, when I was a child, I dreamed things before they happened. Nothing big. I sure couldn’t pick lotto numbers or anything. It came and went. I don’t get it so much these days.”

“Wow. Thanks for telling me. Mom doesn’t want to know anything. I confided in her once. Frank put his foot down.”

They fell silent and lighted cigarettes. Bernice finished hers. She hesitated, then patted Lourdes’s shoulder, turned and walked back to the cabin.

After breakfast at the Bigfish, their mood thawed, and by mid afternoon everyone agreed to stay—anything less was an unreasonable waste of what promised to be fine weather and several as yet corked bottles of wine.

Indeed, the remainder of the visit was splendid. By day, they set up a badminton net and a crude horseshoe pit and played until the light failed. Karla and Li-Hua shot two memory cards of photos. Bernice taught Lourdes cribbage and gin rummy. She even managed to power through a

book about dream symbolism by candlelight while her companions slept. The book wasn't particularly illuminating in regards to her specific experiences. Nonetheless, she slept with it clutched to her breast like a talisman.

On the final evening, Bernice went with Lourdes to the woodshed to fetch an armload of dry pine to bank the fire. They lingered a moment, saying nothing, listening to the crickets and the owls. From inside came the raucous cries and curses of the latest debate between Dixie and Karla.

Lourdes said, "I haven't thanked you. I was in trouble the other night."

Bernice laughed softly. "Don't worry about it. Nancy would've killed me herself if I'd let you sink. You have no idea how many years she spent freezing by the pool while I had my swim lessons when we were kids."

"That's Mom."

"Yes, well…" Bernice cleared her throat. "I think I was hallucinating. Lack of oxygen to the brain."

"Oh?"

"I've been meaning to ask. Did you happen to see anything odd in the water?"

"Besides you?"

"Watch your lips, kid." Bernice smiled, but her hand tightened on the frame of the shed. The pit of her stomach knotted. Last night she'd been under the lake again, and Nancy was with her, glimmering dead white, hands extended. Only, it wasn't Nancy. She'd simply given the figure a face. "No biggie. I sucked in a lot of water. I think a fish swam by. Panicked me a bit."

Darkness had stolen across the water and through the trees, and Lourdes was hidden mostly in shadow, except for where lantern light came from the windows and revealed her hair in halo, a piece of her shoulder, but nothing of her expression. She said, "I didn't see any fish." She was silent for a moment, and when she spoke again her tone was strange. "There was something wrong with that boat."

"I'll say. Probably rotted clean through."

"What I mean is, it wasn't right. It didn't belong here."

Bernice tried to think of a witty response. She wanted to scoff at what Lourdes was hinting. “Oh,” she said. “*The Flying Dinghy* of Lake Crescent, eh?”

Lourdes didn’t say anything.

7

Three years passed before the Redfield Girls returned to Lake Crescent. This was Dixie’s year to choose and she invited Lourdes, who agreed to join them. Bernice and Li-Hua declined to accompany their friends on the trip, a first since the women had established the yearly tradition. Bernice begged off because the week prior she’d fallen while cleaning her gutters and suffered a broken ankle. It was healing nicely, although it was wrapped in a cast and not fit for bearing any kind of weight. Li-Hua’s excuse was that Hung remained in China on a business trip and someone had to keep an eye on their rambunctious teenage sons, Jerrod and Jules.

Bernice knew better. While Dixie and Karla had quickly gotten over the close call with the rowboat, she and Li-Hua shared a profound antipathy toward the lake; its uncanny emanations repelled them. As for Lourdes, an invitation into the circle was irresistible to a girl of her youth and inexperience, albeit she expressed reluctance to abandon Bernice. In the end, they had a few glasses of wine and Bernice told her to go—no sense watching an old fuddy duddy lie about all weekend listening to her bones knit.

Bernice spent the whole weekend at home, pruning rose bushes, and riding around on Elmer’s sputtering mower. Sunday morning news predicted a storm. She worked straight through lunch and finished putting away the tools and hosing cut grass stems from her ankle cast minutes before storm clouds blocked out the fading sun. Thunder cracked in the distance and it began to rain. She hobbled to the pantry, searching for flashlights and spare batteries. The power died a few minutes later, as it always did during storms, and she grimaced with smug satisfaction as she lighted a bunch of candles (some of the very same she’d purchased on Saturday!) in the kitchen and her bedroom. She boiled tea on the camp stove Elmer had always kept stashed in the garage, and retired to bed, intent upon reading a

few chapters into a pictorial history of the Mima Mounds. The long, long afternoon of yard work put her under before she'd read two pages.

Bernice woke in complete darkness to the wind and rain falling heavily on the frame house. A lightning flash caused the shadows of the trees to stretch long, grasping fingers down the wall and across her blanket. Something thumped repeatedly. She grabbed the flashlight and crawled from bed and went into the living room, leaning on the cheap rubber-tipped cane she'd gotten at the hospital. The front door was wide open. The elements poured through, and all the papers she'd left stacked on the coffee table were flung across the floor. She put her shoulder against the door and forced it shut and threw the deadbolt for good measure.

She fell into an easy chair and waited with gritted teeth for the pain in her ankle to subside. While she recovered, the fact the door had been locked earlier began to weigh heavily on her mind. What was it that brought her awake? The noise of the door banging on the wall? She didn't think so. She'd heard someone call her name.

The storm shook the house and lightning sizzled, lighting the bay windows so fiercely she shielded her eyes. Sleep was impossible and she remained curled in her chair, waiting for dawn. Around two o'clock in the morning, someone knocked on the door. Three loud raps. She almost had a heart attack from the spike of fear that shot through her.

Without thinking, she cried, "Lourdes? Is that you?" There was no answer, and in an instant her thoughts veered toward visions of intruders bent on mischief and the spit dried in her mouth. Far too afraid to move, she waited, breath caught, straining to hear above the roar of the wind. The knocks weren't repeated.

8

Bernice didn't fly to France for Lourdes's funeral. Nancy, mad with grief, wanted nothing to do with her sister. Why hadn't Bernice been there to protect Lourdes? She'd allowed their daughter to go off with a couple of people Nancy and Francois scarcely knew and now the girl was never coming back. As the weeks went by, Nancy and Bernice mended fences,

although Francois still wouldn't speak to her, and the boys followed suit. Those were dark days.

She'd gone into a stupor when the authorities gave her the news; ate a few Valiums left over from when she put Elmer in the ground, and buried herself in blankets. She refused to leave the house, to answer the phone, scarcely remembered to eat or shower.

Li-Hua told her more about the accident when Bernice was finally weaned off tranquilizers and showed signs of life once again.

The story went like this: Dixie had driven Karla and Lourdes to Joyce, a small town a few miles west of Lake Crescent. They ate at a tiny diner, bought some postcards at the general store, and started back for Olympia after dark. Nobody knew what went wrong, exactly. The best guess was Dixie's Subaru left the road and smashed through the guard rail at mile 38—Ambulance Point. Presumably the car went in and sank. Rescue divers came from Seattle and the area was dredged, but no car or bodies were found. There were mutters that maybe the crash happened elsewhere, or not at all, and conjectures regarding drift or muck at the bottom. Ultimately, it amounted to bald speculation. The more forthcoming authorities marked it down as another tragic mystery attributed to the Lake Crescent curse.

Bernice took a leave of absence from work that stretched into retirement. Going back simply wasn't an option; seeing new faces in Dixie and Karla's classrooms, how life went on without missing a beat, gutted her. Li-Hua remained in the counselor's office. She and Hung had come very late to professional life and neither could afford retirement. Nonetheless, everything was different after the accident. The remaining Redfield Girls drifted apart—a couple transferred, three more called it quits for teaching, and the others simply stopped calling. The parties and annual trips were finished. Everybody moved on.

One night that winter, Li-Hua phoned. "Look, there's something I need to tell you. About the girls."

Bernice was lying in bed looking at a crossword puzzle. Her hands trembled and she snapped the pencil. "Are you all right, Li?" Her friend had lost too much weight and she didn't smile anymore. It was obvious she carried a burden, a secret that she kept away from her friend. Bernice knew

all along there was more to the story surrounding the accident and she'd pretended otherwise from pure cowardice. "Do you want me to come over?"

"No. Just listen. I've tried to tell you this before, but I couldn't. I was afraid of what you might do. I was *afraid*, Bernie." Li-Hua's voice broke. "Karla called me on the night it happened. None of it made sense; I was groggy and there was a lot of shouting. People sound different when they're scared, so it was a few seconds before I recognized her voice. Karla was panicked, talking very fast. She told me they'd lost control of the car and were in the water. I think the car was actually underwater. The doors wouldn't open. She begged me for help. The call only lasted a few seconds. All of them started screaming and it ended. I dialed 911 and told the operator where I thought they were. Then I tried the girls' cell phones. I just got recordings."

After they disconnected, Bernice lay staring into the glow of the dresser lamp. She slowly picked apart what Li-Hua had said, and as she did, a something shifted deep within her. She removed the cordless phone from its cradle and began to cycle back through every recording stored since the previous summer, until she heard the mechanized voice report there was an unheard message dated 2am the morning of the accident. Since the power had been down, the call went straight to voice mail.

"My God. My God." She deleted it and dropped the phone as if were electrified.

9

Once her ankle healed, she packed some things and made a pilgrimage to the lake. The weather was cold. Brown and black leaves clogged the ditches. She parked on the high cliff above the water, the spot called Ambulance Point, and placed a wreath on the guard rail. She drank a couple of mini bottles of Shiraz and cried until the tears dried on her cheeks and her eyes puffed. She got back into the car and drove down to the public boat launch.

The season was over, so the launch was mostly deserted except for a flat bed truck and trailer in the lot, and a medium sized motor boat moored at the dock. Bernice almost cruised by without stopping—intent upon renting

a room at the Bigfish Lodge. What she intended to do at the lodge was a mystery even to herself. She noticed a diver surface near the boat. She idled in front of the empty ticket booth, and watched the diver paddle about, fiddling with settings on his or her mask, and finally clamber aboard the boat.

She sat with the windshield wipers going, a soft, sad ballad on the radio. She began to shake, stricken by something deeper than mere sorrow or regret; an ancient, more primitive emotion. Her knuckles whitened. The light drained from the sky as she climbed out and crossed the distance to where the diver had removed helmet and fins. It was a younger man with golden hair and a thick golden beard that made his face seem extraordinarily pale. He slumped on the boat's bench seat and shrugged off his tanks. Bernice stood at the edge of the dock. They regarded each other for a while. The wind stiffened and the boat rocked between them.

He said, "You're here for someone?"

"Yeah. Friends."

"Those women who disappeared this summer. I'm real sorry." The flesh around his eyes and mouth was soft. She wondered if that was from being immersed or from weeping.

"Are you the man who comes here diving for clues?"

"There's a couple of other guys, too. And a company from Oregon. I think those dudes are treasure hunting, though."

"The men from the company."

He nodded.

"I hate people sometimes. What about you? Aren't *you* treasure hunting? Looking for a story? I read about that."

"I like to think of it as seeking answers. This lake's a thief. You know, maybe if I find them, the lives that it stole, I can free them. Those souls don't belong here."

"I had a lot of bad dreams about this lake and my sister. I kept seeing her face. She was dead. Drowned. After the accident, I realized all along I'd been mistaken. It wasn't my sister I saw, but her daughter. Those two didn't have much of a resemblance, except the eyes and mouth. I got confused."

“That’s a raw deal, miss. My brother was killed in a crash. Driving to Bellingham and a cement truck rear ended him. Worst part is, and I apologize if this sounds cruel, you’ll be stuck with this the rest of your life. It doesn’t go away, ever.”

“We’re losing the light,” she said.

Out in the reeds and the darkness, a loon screamed.

Blackwood's Baby

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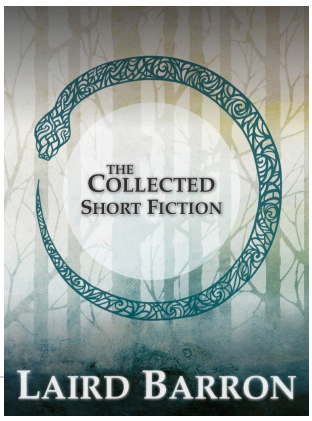

Late afternoon sun baked the clay and plaster buildings of the town.

Its dirt streets lay empty, packed as hard as iron. The boarding house sweltered. Luke Honey sat in a chair in the shadows across from the window. Nothing stirred except flies buzzing on the window ledge. The window was a gap bracketed by warped shutters and it opened into a portal view of the blazing white stone wall of the cantina across the alley. Since the fistfight, he wasn't welcome in the cantina although he'd seen the other three men he'd fought there each afternoon, drunk and laughing. The scabs on his knuckles were nearly healed. Every two days, one of the stock boys brought him a bottle.

Today, Luke Honey was drinking good strong Irish whiskey. His hands were clammy and his shirt stuck to his back and armpits. A cockroach scuttled into the long shadow of the bottle and waited. An overhead fan hung motionless. Clerk Galtero leaned on the counter and read a newspaper gone brittle as ancient papyrus, its fiber sucked dry by the heat; a glass of cloudy water pinned the corner. Clerk Galtero's bald skull shone in the gloom and his mustache drooped, sweat dripping from the tips and onto the paper. The clerk was from Barcelona and Luke Honey heard the fellow had served in the French Foreign Legion on the Macedonian Front during the Great War, and that he'd been clipped in the arm and that was why it curled tight and useless against his ribs.

A boy entered the house. He was black and covered with the yellow dust that settled upon everything in this place. He wore a uniform of some kind, and a cap with a narrow brim, and no shoes. Luke Honey guessed his age at eleven or twelve, although his face was worn, the flesh creased around his

mouth, and his eyes suggested sullen apathy born of wisdom. Here, on the edge of a wasteland, even the children appeared weathered and aged. Perhaps that was how Luke Honey himself appeared now that he'd lived on the plains and in the jungles for seven years. Perhaps the land had chiseled and filed him down too. He didn't know because he seldom glanced at the mirror anymore. On the other hand, there were some, such as a Boer and another renowned hunter from Canada Luke Honey had accompanied on many safaris, who seemed stronger, more vibrant with each passing season, as if the dust and the heat, the cloying jungle rot and the blood they spilled fed them, bred into them a savage vitality.

The boy handed him a telegram in a stiff white envelope with fingerprints all over it. Luke Honey gave him a fifty cent piece and the boy left. Luke Honey tossed the envelope on the table. He struck a match with his thumbnail and lighted a cigarette. The light coming through the window began to thicken. Orange shadows tinged black slid across the wall of the cantina. He poured a glass of whiskey and drank it in a gulp. He poured another and set it aside. The cockroach fled under the edge of the table.

Two women descended the stairs. White women, perhaps English, certainly foreign travelers. They wore heavy, Victorian dresses, equally staid bonnets, and sheer veils. The younger of the pair inclined her head toward Luke Honey as she passed. Her lips were thinned in disapproval. She and her companion opened the door and walked though its rectangle of shimmering brilliance into the furnace. The door swung shut.

Clerk Galtero folded the newspaper and placed it under the counter. He tipped his glass toward Luke Honey in a sardonic toast. "The ladies complained about you. You make noise in your room at night, the younger one says. You cry out, like a man in delirium. The walls are thin and she cannot sleep, so she complains to me."

"Oh. Is the other one deaf, then?" Luke Honey smoked his cigarette with the corner of his mouth. He sliced open the envelope with a pocket knife and unfolded the telegram and read its contents. The letter was an invitation from one Mr. Liam Welloc Esquire to partake in an annual private hunt in Washington State. The hunt occurred on remote ancestral property, its guests designated by some arcane combination of pedigree and longstanding association with the host, or by virtue of notoriety in hunting

circles. The telegram chilled the sweat trickling down his face. Luke Honey was not a particularly superstitious man; nonetheless, this missive called with an eerie intimacy and struck a chord deep within him, awakened an instinctive dread that fate beckoned across the years, the bloody plains and darkened seas, to claim him.

He stuck the telegram into his shirt pocket, then drank his whiskey. He poured another shot and lighted another cigarette and stared at the window. The light darkened to purple and the wall faded, was almost invisible. “I have nightmares. Give the ladies my apologies.” He’d lived in the boarding house for three weeks and this was the second time he and Clerk Galtero had exchanged more than a word in passing. Galtero’s brother Enrique managed the place in the evening. Luke Honey hadn’t spoken to him much either. After years in the wilderness, he usually talked to himself.

Clerk Galtero spilled the dregs of water on the floor and walked over with his queer, hitching step, and poured the glass full of Luke Honey’s whiskey. He sat in one of the rickety chairs. His good arm lay atop the table. His hands and arm were thickly muscled. The Legion tattoos had begun to elongate as his flesh loosened. “I know you,” he said. “I’ve heard talk. I’ve seen your guns. Most of the foreign hunters wear trophies. Your friends, the other Americans, wear teeth and claws from their kills.”

“We aren’t friends.”

“Your associates. I wonder though, why you have come and why you stay.”

“I’m done with the bush. That’s all.”

“This place is not so good for a man such as yourself. There is only trouble for you here.”

Luke Honey smiled wryly. “Oh, you think I’ve gone native.”

“Not at all. I doubt you get along with anyone.”

“I’ll be leaving soon.” Luke Honey touched the paper in his pocket. “For the States. I suppose your customers will finally have some peace.”

They finished their drinks and sat in silence. When it became dark, Clerk Galtero rose and went about lighting the lamps. Luke Honey climbed the stairs to his stifling room. He lay sweating on the bed and dreamed of his brother Michael, as he had for six nights running. The next morning he

arranged for transportation to the coast. Three days later he was aboard a cargo plane bound for Morocco. Following Morocco there would be ships and trains until he eventually stood again on American soil after half a lifetime. Meanwhile, he looked out the tiny window. The plains slowly disappeared into the red haze of the rim of the Earth.

Luke Honey and his party arrived at the lodge not long before dark. They'd come in two cars and the staff earned its keep transferring the mountain of bags and steamer trunks indoors before the storm broadsided the valley. Lightning sizzled from the vast snout of fast approaching purpleblack clouds. Thunder growled. A rising breeze plucked leaves from the treetops. Luke Honey leaned against a marble colonnade and smoked a cigarette, personal luggage stacked neatly at his side. He disliked trusting his rifles and knives to bellhops and porters.

The Black Ram Lodge towered above a lightly wooded hillside overlooking Olde Towne. The lodge and its town lay in the folds of Ransom Hollow, separated from the lights of Seattle by miles of dirt road and forested hills. "Backward country," one of the men had called it during the long drive. Luke Honey rode with the Brits Bullard and Wesley. They'd shared a flask of brandy while the car left the lowlands and climbed toward the mountains, passing small, quaint townships and ramshackle farms tenanted by sober yeoman folk. Wesley and Bullard snickered like a pair of itinerant knights at the potato pickers in filthy motley, bowed to their labor in dark, muddy fields. Luke Honey didn't share the mirth. He'd seen enough bloody peasant revolts to know better. He knew also that fine cars and carriages, horses and guns, the gloss of their own pale skin, cursed the nobility with a false sense of well-being, of safety. He'd removed a bullet from his pocket. The bullet was made for a .454 rifle and it was large. He'd turned it over in his fingers and stared out the window without speaking again.

After supper, Dr. Landscomb and Mr. Liam Welloc, co-proprietors of the lodge, entertained the small group of far-flung travelers who'd come for the annual hunt. Servants lighted a fire in the hearth and the eight gentlemen settled into grand oversized chairs. The parlor was a dramatic landscape of

marble statuary and massive bookshelves, stuffed and mounted heads of ferocious exotic beasts, liquor cabinets and a pair of billiard tables. Rain and wind hammered the windows. Lights flickered dangerously, promising a rustic evening of candlelight and kerosene lamps.

The assembly was supremely merry when the tale-telling began.

"We were in Mexico," Lord Bullard said. Lord Bullard hailed from Essex; a decorated former officer in the Queen's Royal Lancers who'd fought briefly in the Boer War, but had done most of his time pacifying the "wogs" in the Punjab. Apparently his family was enormously wealthy in lands and titles, and these days he traveled to the exclusion of all else. He puffed on his cigar while a servant held the flame of a long-handled match steady. "Summer of 1919. The war had just ended. Some Industrialist friends of mine were visiting from Europe. Moaning and sulking about the shutdowns of their munitions factories and the like. Beastly boring."

"Quite, I'm sure," Dr. Landscomb said. The doctor was tall and thin. He possessed the ascetic bearing of Eastern European royalty. He had earned his degree in medicine at Harvard and owned at least a quarter of everything there was to own within two counties.

"Ah, a trying time for the makers of bombs and guns," Mr. Liam Welloc said. He too was tall, but thick and broad with the neck and hands of the ancient Greek statues of Herakles. His hair and beard were bronze and lush for a man his age. His family owned half again what the Landscombs did and reportedly maintained ancestral estates in England and France. "One would think there are enough territorial skirmishes underway to keep the coins flowing. The Balkans, for example. Or Africa."

"Exactly. It's a lack of imagination," Mr. Williams said. A bluff, weatherbeaten rancher baron attired in Stetson boots, corduroys and impressive buckle, a starched shirt with ivory buttons, and an immaculate Stetson hat. He drank Jack Daniel's, kept the bottle on a dais at his side. He'd come from Texas with Mr. McEvoy and Mr. Briggs. McEvoy and Briggs were far more buttoned down in Brooks Brothers suits and bowlers; a banker and mine owner, respectively. Williams drained his whiskey and poured another, waving off the ever-hovering servant. "That's what's killing

you boys. Trapped in the Renaissance. Can't run an empire without a little imagination."

"Besides, Germany is sharpening its knives," Mr. Briggs said. "Your friends will be cranking up the assembly lines inside of five years. Trust me. They've the taste for blood, those Krauts. You can't beat that outta them. My mistress is Bavarian, so I know."

Lord Bullard thumped his cigar in the elegant pot near his foot. He cleared his throat. "Harrumph. Mexico City, 1919. Bloody hot. Miasma, thick and gray from smokestacks and chimneys of all those hovels they heap like ruddy anthills."

"The smog reminded me of home," Wesley said. Wesley dressed in a heavy linen coat and his boots were polished to a high gloss. His hair was slick and parted at the middle and it shone in the firelight. When Luke Honey looked at him, he thought *Mr. Weasel.*

"A Mexican prince invited us to a hunt on his estate. He was conducting business in the city, so we laid over at his villa. Had a jolly time."

Mr. Wesley said, "Tubs of booze and a veritable harem of randy strumpets. What was not to like? I was sorry when we departed for the countryside."

"Who was it, Wes, you, me, and the chap from York… Cantwell? Cotter?"

"Cantwell."

"Yes, right then. The three of us were exhausted and chafed beyond bearing from frantic revels at the good Prince's demesne, so we ventured into the streets to seek new pleasures."

"Which, ironically, constituted the pursuit of more liquor and fresh strumpets."

"On the way from one particularly unsavory cantina to another, we were accosted by a ragtag individual who leaped at us from some occulted nook in an alley. This person was of singularly dreadful countenance; wan and emaciated, afflicted by wasting disease and privation. He smelled like the innards of a rotting sheep carcass, and his appearance was most unwelcome. However, he wheedled and beseeched my attention, in passable English, I must add, and clung to my sleeve with such fervor it soon became apparent the only way to rid myself of his attention was to hear him out."

“We were confounded upon learning this wretch was an expatriate American,” Mr. Wesley said.

“Thunderstruck!”

“Ye Gods,” Dr. Landscomb said. “This tale bears the trappings of a penny dreadful. More, more, gentlemen!”

“The man’s name was Harris. He’d once done columns for some paper and visited Mexico to conduct research for a story he never got around to writing. The entire tale of his fall from grace is long and sordid. It’s enough to say he entered the company of disreputable characters and took to wickedness and vice. The chap was plainly overjoyed to encounter fellow speakers of English, but we soon learned there was much more to this encounter than mere chance. He knew our names, where we intended to hunt, and other details I’ve put aside.”

“It was uncanny,” Mr. Wesley said.

“The man was obviously a grifter,” Luke Honey said from his spot near the hearth where he’d been lazing with his eyes mostly shut and thinking with mounting sullenness that the pair of Brits were entirely too smug, especially Lord Bullard with his gold rimmed monocle and cavalry saber. “A spy. Did he invite you to a seance? To predict your fortune with a handful of runes?”

“In fact, he did inveigle us to join him in a smoky den of cutthroats and thieves where this ancient crone read the entrails of chickens like the pagans read Tarot cards. It was she who sent him into the streets to track us.” Lord Bullard fixed Luke Honey with a bloodshot stare. “Mock as you will, it was a rare experience.”

Luke Honey chuckled and closed his eyes again. “I wouldn’t dream of mocking you. The Romans swore by the custom of gutting pigeons. Who am I to argue?”

“Whom indeed? The crone scrabbled in the guts, muttering to herself while Harris crouched at her side and translated. He claimed the hag dreamed of our arrival in the city for some time and that these visions were driving her to aggravation. She described a ‘black cloud’ obscuring the future. There was trouble awaiting us, and soon. Something about a cave. We all laughed, of course, just as you did, Mr. Honey.” Lord Bullard smiled a wry, wan smile that accentuated the creases of his face, his hangdog mouth.

“Eventually, we extricated ourselves and made for the nearest taproom and forgot the whole incident. The Prince returned from his business and escorted us in style to a lavish country estate deep in the central region of the country. Twelve of us gathered to feast at his table, and in the morning he released boars into the woods.”

“Twelve, you say?” Mr. Williams said, brows disappearing under his big hat. “Well, sir, I hope one of you boys got a picture to commemorate the occasion.”

“I need another belt to fortify myself in the face of this heckling,” Lord Bullard said, snapping his fingers as the servant rushed over to fill his glass. The Englishman drained his glass and wagged his head for another. “To the point then: we shot two boars and wounded another—the largest of them. A prize pig, that one, with tusks like bayonets and the smoothest, blackest hide. Cantwell winged the brute, but the boar escaped and we were forced to spend the better part of two days tracking it through a benighted jungle. The blood trail disappeared into a mountain honeycombed with caves. Naturally, honor dictates pursuing wounded quarry and dispatching it. Alas, a brief discussion with the Prince and his guides convinced us of the folly of descending into the caverns. The system extended for many miles and was largely uncharted. No one of any sense attempted to navigate them. We determined to return home, satisfied with the smaller boars.”

“Eh, the great white hunters balked at the precipice of the unknown?” Luke Honey said. “Thank God Cabot and Drake couldn’t see you fellows quailing in the face of fear.”

Lord Bullard spluttered and Mr. Wesley rose quickly, hand on the large ornamented pistol he wore holstered under his coat. He said, “I demand satisfaction!” His smile was sharp and vicious and Luke Honey had little doubt the man yearned for moments such as these.

Dr. Landscomb smoothly interposed himself, arms spread in a placating manner. “Gentlemen, gentlemen! This isn’t the Wild West. There’ll be no dueling on these premises. Mr. Wesley, you’re among friends. Please, relax and have another drink. Mr. Honey, as for you, perhaps a bit of moderation is in order.”

“You may be correct,” Luke Honey said, casually sliding his revolver back into its shoulder holster. He looked at Mr. Williams who nodded approvingly and handed him the rapidly diminishing bottle of Jack Daniel’s. Luke Honey took a long pull while staring at Mr. Wesley.

Mr. Wesley sat, folding himself into the chair with lethal grace, but continued to smile through small, crooked teeth. “Go on, Arthur. You were getting to the good part.”

Lord Bullard wiped his red face with a handkerchief. His voice scarcely above a mutter, he said, “An American named Henderson had other ideas and he convinced two Austrians to accompany him into the caves while the rest of us made camp for the night. The poor fools slipped away and were gone for at least an hour before the rest of us realized what they’d done. We never saw any of them again. There was a rescue mission. The Mexican Army deployed a squadron of expertly trained and equipped mountaineers to investigate, but hard rains came and the tunnels were treacherous, full of rockslides and floodwater. It would’ve been suicide to persist, and so our comrades were abandoned to their fates. This became a local legend and I’ve reports of peasants who claim to hear men screaming from the caves on certain, lonely nights directly before a storm.”

The men sat in uncomfortable silence while the windows rattled and wind moaned in the flue. Mr. Liam Welloc eventually stood and went to a bookcase. He retrieved a slim, leather bound volume and stood before the hearth, book balanced in one hand, a crystal goblet of liquor in the other. “As you may or may not know, Ian’s grandfather and mine were among the founders of this town. Most of the early families arrived here from places like New York and Boston, and a few from California when they discovered the golden state not quite to their taste. The Black Ram itself has gone through several incarnations since it was built as a trading post by a merchant named Caldwell Ellis in 1860 on the eve of that nasty business between the Blue and the Gray. My grandfather purchased this property in 1890 and renovated it as the summer home for him and his new bride, Felicia. Much of this probably isn’t of much interest to you, so I’ll not blather on about the trials and tribulations of my forebears, nor how this grand house became a lodge. For now, let me welcome you into our most sacred tradition and we wish each of you good fortune on the morrow.”

Dr. Landscomb said, “I concur. As you know, there are plenty of boar and deer on this preserve, but assuredly you’ve come for the great stag known as Blackwood’s Baby—”

“Wot, wot?” Mr. Wesley said in mock surprise. “We’re not here for the namesake of this fine establishment? What of the Black Ram?”

Mr. Liam Welloc smiled, and to Luke Honey’s mind there was something cold and sinister in the man’s expression. Mr. Liam Welloc said, “There was never a black ram. It’s a euphemism for… Well, that’s a story for another evening.”

Dr. Landscomb cleared his throat politely. “As I said—the stag is a mighty specimen—surely the equal of any beast you’ve hunted. He is the king of the wood and descended from a venerable line. I will note, that while occasionally cornered, none of these beasts has ever been taken. In any event, the man who kills the stag shall claim my great grandfather’s Sharps model-1851 as a prize. The rifle was custom built for Constantine Landscomb III by Christian Sharps himself, and is nearly priceless. The victorious fellow shall also perforce earn a place among the hallowed ranks of elite gamesmen the world over.”

“And ten thousand dollars, sterling silver,” Mr. Wesley said, rubbing his hands together.

“Amen, partner!” Mr. McEvoy said. “Who needs another round?”

It was quite late when the men said their goodnights and retired.

The rain slackened to drizzle. Luke Honey lay with his eyes open, listening to it rasp against the window. He’d dreamed of Africa, then of his dead brother Michael toiling in the field of their home in Ingram, just over the pass through the Cascades. His little brother turned to him and waved. His left eye was a hole. Luke Honey had awakened with sick fear in his heart.

While the sky was still dark he dressed and walked downstairs and outside to the barn. The barn lay across the muddy drive from the lodge. Inside, stable hands drifted through the silty gloom preparing dogs and horses for the day ahead. He breathed in the musk of brutish sweat and green manure, gun oil and oiled leather, the evil stink of dogs swaggering in anticipation of

murder. He lighted a cigarette and smoked it leaning against a rail while the air brightened from black to gray.

"There you are, mate." Mr. Wesley stepped into the barn and walked toward Luke Honey. He wore workmanlike breeches, a simple shirt, and a bowler. He briskly rolled his sleeves.

Luke Honey didn't see a gun, although Mr. Wesley had a large knife slung low on his hip. He smiled and tapped the brim of his hat and then tried to put out the Brit's eye with a flick of his flaming cigarette. Mr. Wesley flinched, forearms raised, palms inverted, old London prizefighter style, and Luke Honey made a fist and struck him in the ribs below the heart, and followed that with a clubbing blow to the side of his neck. Mr. Wesley was stouter than he appeared. He shrugged and trapped Luke Honey's lead arm in the crook of his elbow and butted him in the jaw. Luke Honey wrenched his arm loose and swiped his fingers at Mr. Wesley's mouth, hoping to fishhook him, and tried to catch his balance on the rail with his off hand. Rotten wood gave way and he dropped to his hands and knees. Light began to slide back and forth in the sky as if he'd plunged his head into a water trough. Mr. Wesley slammed his shin across Luke Honey's chest, flipping him onto his back like a turtle. He sprawled in the wet straw, mouth agape, struggling for air, his mind filled with snow.

"Well. That's it, then." Mr. Wesley stood over him for a moment, face shiny, slick hair in disarray. He bent and scooped up his bowler, scuffed it against his pants leg and smiled at Luke Honey. He clapped the bowler onto his head and limped off.

"Should I call a doctor, kid?" Mr. Williams struck a match on the heel of his boot, momentarily burning away shadows around his perch on a hay bale. A couple of the stable hands had stopped to gawk and they jolted from their reverie and rushed to quiet the agitated mastiffs who whined and growled and strutted in their pens.

"No, he's okay," Luke Honey said when he could. "Me, I'm going to rest here a bit."

Mr. Williams chuckled. He smoked his cigarette and walked over to Luke Honey and looked down at him with a bemused squint. "Boy, what you got against them Limeys anyway?"

The left side of Luke Honey's face was already swollen. Drawing breath caused flames to lick in his chest. "My grandfather chopped cotton. My father picked potatoes."

"Not you, though."

"Nope," Luke Honey said. "Not me."

The lord of the stables was named Scobie, a gaunt and gnarled Welshman whose cunning and guile with dogs and horses, and traps and snares, had elevated him to the status of a peasant prince. He dressed in stained and weathered leather garments from some dim Medieval era and his thin hair bloomed in a white cloud. Dirt ingrained his hands and nails, and when he smiled his remaining teeth were sharp and crooked. His father had been a master falconer, but the modern hunt didn't call for birds any more.

The dogs and the dog handlers went first and the rest of the party entered the woods an hour later. Luke Honey accompanied the Texans and Mr. Liam Welloc. They rode light, tough horses. Mr. McEvoy commented on the relative slightness of the horses and Mr. Welloc explained that the animals were bred for endurance and agility.

The forest spread around them like a cavern. Well-beaten trails crisscrossed through impenetrable underbrush and unto milky dimness. Water dripped from branches. After a couple of hours they stopped and had tea and biscuits prepared by earnest young men in lodge livery.

"Try some chaw," Mr. Briggs said. He cut a plug of hard tobacco and handed it to Luke Honey. Luke Honey disliked tobacco. He put it in his mouth and chewed. The Brits stood nearby in a cluster talking to Dr. Landscomb and Mr. Liam Welloc. Mr. Briggs said, "You in the war? You look too young."

"I was fifteen when we joined the dance. Just missed all that fun."

"Bully for you, as the Limeys would say. You can shoot, I bet. Everybody here either has money or can shoot. Or both. No offense, but I don't have you pegged for a man of means. Nah, you remind me of some of the boys in my crew. Hard-bitten. A hell-raiser."

“I’ve done well enough, in fact.”

“He’s the *real* great white hunter,” Mr. Williams said. “One of those fellers who shoots lions and elephants on the Dark Continent. Fortunes to be won in the ivory trade. That right, Mr. Honey?”

“Yeah. I was over there for a while.”

“Huh, I suppose you have that look about you,” Mr. Briggs said. “You led safaris?”

“I worked for the Dutch.”

“Leave it be,” Mr. Williams said. “The man’s not a natural braggart.”

“Where did you learn to hunt?” Mr. McEvoy said.

“My cousins. They all lived in the hills in Utah. One of them was a sniper during the war.” Luke Honey spat tobacco into the leaves. “When my mother died I went to live with my uncle and his family and those folks have lots of kin in South Africa. After college I got a case of wanderlust. One thing led to another.”

“Damned peculiar upbringing. College even.”

“What kid doesn’t dream of stalking the savanna?” Mr. Briggs said.

“You must have a hundred and one tales.”

“Surely, after that kind of experience, this trip must be rather tame,” Mr. McEvoy said.

“Hear, hear,” Mr. Briggs said. “Give up the ivory trade for a not-so-likely chance to bag some old stag in dull as dirt U.S.A.?”

“Ten thousand sterling silver buys a lot of wine and song, amigos,” Mr. Williams said. “Besides, who says the kid’s quit anything?”

“Well, sir, I *am* shut of the business.”

“Why is that?” Mr. Briggs said.

Luke Honey wiped his mouth. “One fine day I was standing on a plain with the hottest sun you can imagine beating down. Me and some other men had set up a crossfire and plugged maybe thirty elephants from this enormous herd. The skinners got to work with their machetes and axes. Meanwhile, I got roaring drunk with the rest of the men. A newspaper flew in a photographer on a biplane. The photographer posed us next to a pile of

tusks. The tusks were stacked like cordwood and there was blood and flies everywhere. I threw up during one of the pictures. The heat and the whiskey, I thought. They put me in a tent for a couple of days while a fever fastened to me. I ranted and raved and they had to lash me down. You see, I thought the devil was hiding under my cot, that he was waiting to claim my soul. I dreamt my dear dead mother came and stood at the entrance of the tent. She had soft, magnificent wings folded against her back. White light surrounded her. The light was brilliant. Her face was dark and her eyes were fiery. She spat on the ground and the tent flaps flew shut and I was left alone in darkness. The company got me to a village where there was a real doctor who gave me quinine and I didn't quite die."

"Are you saying you quit the safaris because your mother might disapprove from her cloud in heaven?" Mr. Briggs said.

"Nope. I'm more worried she might be disapproving from an ice floe in Hell."

In the afternoon, Lord Bullard shot a medium buck that was cornered by Scobie's mastiff pack. Luke Honey and Mr. Williams reined in at a remove from the action. The killing went swiftly. The buck had been severely mauled prior to their arrival. Mr. Wesley dismounted and cut the animal's throat with his overlarge knife while the dogs sniffed around and pissed on the bushes.

"Not quite as glorious as ye olden days, eh?" Mr. Williams said. He took a manly gulp of whiskey from his flask and passed it to Luke Honey.

Luke Honey drank, relishing the dark fire coursing over his bloody teeth. "German nobles still use spears to hunt boars."

"I wager more than one of those ol' boys gets his manhood torn off on occasion."

"It happens." Luke Honey slapped his right thigh. "When I was younger and stupider I was gored. Hit the bone. Luckily the boar was heart shot—stone dead when it stuck me so I didn't get ripped in two."

"Damn," Mr. Williams said.

Mr. Briggs and Mr. McEvoy stared at Luke Honey with something akin to religious awe. “Spears?” Mr. Briggs said. “Did you bring one?”

“Nope. A couple of rifles, my .45, and some knives. I travel light.”

“I’m shocked the Limeys put up with the lack of foot servants,” Mr. Briggs said.

“I doubt any of us are capable of understanding you, Mr. Honey,” Mr. Williams said. “I’m beginning to think you may be one of those rare mysteries of the world.”

An hour before dusk, Scobie and a grimy boy in suspenders and no shirt approached the hunters while they paused to smoke cigarettes, drink brandy, and water the horses.

Scobie said, “Arlen here came across sign of a large stag yonder a bit. Fair knocked the bark from trees with its antlers, right boy?” The boy nodded and scowled as Scobie tousled his hair. “The boy has a keen eye. How long were the tracks?” The boy gestured and Lord Bullard whistled in astonishment.

Mr. Williams snorted and fanned a circle with his hat to disperse a cloud of mosquitoes. “We’re talking about a deer, not a damned buffalo.”

Scobie shrugged. “Blackwood’s Baby is twice the size of any buck you’ve set eyes on, I’ll reckon.”

“Pshaw!” Mr. Williams cut himself a plug and stuffed it into his mouth. He nudged his roan sideways, disengaging from the conversation.

“I say, let’s have at this stag,” Mr. Wesley said, to which Lord Bullard nodded.

“Damned tooting. I’d like a crack at the critter,” Mr. Briggs said.

“The dogs are tired and it’s late,” Scobie said. “I’ve marked the trail, so we can find it easy tomorrow.”

“Bloody hell!” Lord Bullard said. “We’ve light yet. I’ve paid my wage to nab this beastie, so I say lead on!”

“Easy, now,” Mr. Welloc said. “Night’s on us soon and these woods get very, very dark. Crashing about is foolhardy, and if Master Scobie says the dogs need rest, then best to heed his word.”

Lord Bullard rolled his eyes. “What do you suggest, then?”

Scobie said, “Camp is set around the corner. We’ve got hunting shacks scattered along these trails. I’ll kennel the hounds at one and meet you for another go at daybreak.”

“A sensible plan,” Mr. McEvoy said. As the shadows deepened and men and horses became smoky ghosts in the dying light, he’d begun to cast apprehensive glances over his shoulder.

Luke Honey had to admit there was a certain eeriness to the surroundings, a sense of inimical awareness that emanated from the depths of the forest. He noted how the horses flared their nostrils and shifted skittishly. There were boars and bears in this preserve, although he doubted any lurked within a mile after all the gunfire and barking. He’d experienced a similar sense of menace in Africa near the hidden den of a terrible lion, a dreaded man eater. He rubbed his horse’s neck and kept a close watch on the bushes.

Mr. Landscomb clasped Scobie’s elbow. “Once you’ve seen to the animals, do leave them to the lads. I’d enjoy your presence after supper.”

Scobie looked unhappy. He nodded curtly and left with the boy.

Camp was a fire pit centered between two boulders the size of carriages. A dilapidated lean-to provided a dry area to spread sleeping bags and hang clothes. Stable boys materialized to unsaddle the horses and tether them behind the shed. Lodge workers had ignited a bonfire and laid out a hot meal sent from the chef. This meal included the roasted heart and liver from the buck Lord Bullard brought down earlier.

“Not sure I’d tuck into those vittles,” Mr. Williams said, waving his fork at Lord Bullard and Mr. Wesley. “Should let that meat cool a day or two, else you’ll get the screamin’ trots.”

Mr. McEvoy stopped shoveling beans into his mouth to laugh. “That’s right. Scarf enough of that liver and you’ll think you caught dysentery.”

Lord Bullard spooned a jellified chunk of liver into his mouth. “Bollocks. Thirty years afield in the muck and the mud with boot leather and

ditchwater for breakfast. My intestines are made of iron. Aye, Wes?"

"You've got the right of it," Mr. Wesley said, although sans his typical enthusiasm. He'd set aside his plate but half finished and now nursed a bottle of Laphroaig.

Luke Honey shucked his soaked jacket and breeches and warmed his toes by the fire with a plate of steak, potatoes and black coffee. He cut the meat into tiny pieces because chewing was difficult. It pleased him to see Mr. Wesley favoring his own ribs whenever he laughed. The Englishman, doughty as he was, seemed rather sickly after a day's exertion. Luke Honey faintly hoped he had one foot in the grave.

A dank mist crept through the trees and the men instinctively clutched blankets around themselves and huddled closer to the blaze, and Luke Honey saw that everyone kept a rifle or pistol near to hand. A wolf howled not too far off and all eyes turned toward the darkness that pressed against the edges of firelight. The horses nickered softly.

Dr. Landscomb said, "Hark, my cue. The wood we now occupy is called Wolfvale and it stretches some fifty miles north to south. If we traveled another twelve miles due east, we'd be in the foothills of the mountains. Wolfvale is, some say, a cursed forest. Of course, that reputation does much to draw visitors." Dr. Landscomb lighted a cigarette. "What do you think, Master Scobie?"

"The settlers considered this an evil place," Scobie said, emerging from the bushes much to the consternation of Mr. Briggs who yelped and half drew his revolver. "No one logs this forest. No one hunts here except for the lords and foolish, desperate townies. People know not to come here because of the dangerous animals that roam. These days, it's the wild beasts, but in the early days, it was mostly Bill."

"Was Bill some rustic lunatic?" Mr. Briggs said.

"We Texans know the type," Mr. Williams said with a grin.

"Oh, no, sirs. Black Bill, Splayfoot Bill, he's the devil. He's Satan and those who carved the town from the hills, and before them the trappers and fishermen, they believed he ruled these dark woods."

“The Indians believed it too,” Mr. Welloc said. “I’ve talked with several of the elders, as did my grandfather with the tribal wise men of his era. The legend of Bill, whom they referred to as the Horned Man, is most ancient. I confess, some of my ancestors were a rather scandalous lot, given to dabbling in the occult and all matters mystical. The town library’s archives are stuffed with treatises composed by the more adventurous founders, and myriad accounts by landholders and commoners alike regarding the weird phenomena prevalent in Ransom Hollow.”

Scobie said, “Aye. Many a village child vanished, an’ grown men an’ women, too. When I was wee, my father brought us in by dusk an’ barred the door tight until morning. Everyone did. Some still do.”

Luke Honey said, “A peculiar arrangement for such a healthy community.”

“Aye, Olde Towne seems robust,” Lord Bullard said.

Dr. Landscomb said. “Those Who Work are tied to the land. A volcano won’t drive them away when there’s fish and fur, crops and timber to be had.”

“Yeah, and you can toss sacrificial wretches into the volcano, too,” Mr. McEvoy said.

“This hunt of ours goes back for many years, long before the lodge itself was established. Without exception, someone is gravely injured, killed, or lost on these expeditions.”

“Lost? What does “lost” mean, precisely?” Mr. Wesley said.

“There are swamps and cliffs, and so forth,” Dr. Landscomb said. “On occasion, men have wandered into the wilds and run afoul of such dangers. But to the point. Ephraim Blackwood settled in Olde Towne at the time of its founding. A widower with two grown sons, he was a furrier by trade. The Blackwoods ran an extensive trap line throughout Ransom Hollow and within ten years of their arrival, they’d become the premier fur trading company in the entire valley. People whispered. Christianity has never gained an overwhelming mandate here, but the Blackwoods’ irreligiousness went a step beyond the pale in the eyes of the locals. Inevitably, loose talk led to muttered accusations of witchcraft. Some alleged the family consorted with Splayfoot Bill, that they’d made a pact. Material wealth for their immortal souls.”

“What else?” Mr. Williams said to uneasy chuckles.

“Yes, what else indeed?” Dr. Landscomb’s smile faded. “It is said that Splayfoot Bill, the Old Man of the Wood, required most unholy indulgences in return for his favors.”

“Do tell,” Lord Bullard said with an expression of sickly fascination.

“The devil takes many forms and it is said he is a being devoted to pain and pleasure. A Catholic priest gave an impromptu sermon in the town square accusing elder Blackwood of lying with the Old Man of the Wood, who assumed the form of a doe, one night by the pallor of a sickle moon, and the issue was a monstrous stag. Some hayseed wit soon dubbed this mythical beast “Blackwood’s Git.” Other, less savory colloquialisms sprang forth, but most eventually faded into obscurity. Nowadays, those who speak of this legend call the stag “Blackwood’s Baby.” Inevitably, the brute we shall pursue in the morn is reputed to be the selfsame animal.”

“Sounds like that Blackwood fella was a long way from Oklahoma,” Mr. Williams said.

“Devil spawn!” Luke Honey said, and laughed sarcastically.

“Bloody preposterous,” Lord Bullard said without conviction.

“Hogwash,” Mr. Briggs said. “You’re scarin’ the women and children, hoss.”

“My apologies, good sir,” Dr. Landscomb said. He didn’t look sorry to Luke Honey.

“Oh, dear.” Lord Bullard lurched to his feet and made for the woods, hands to his belly.

The Texans guffawed and hooted, although the mood sobered when the wolf howled again and was answered by two more of its pack.

Mr. Williams scowled, cocked his big revolver and fired into the air. The report was queerly muffled and its echo died immediately.

“That’ll learn ’em,” Mr. Briggs said, exaggerating his drawl.

“Time for shut eye, boys,” Mr. Williams said. Shortly the men began to yawn and turned in, grumbling and joshing as they spread their blankets on the floor of the lean-to.

Luke Honey made a pillow of the horse blanket. He jacked the bolt action and chambered a round in his *Mauser Gewher 98,* a rifle he'd won from an Austrian diplomat in Nairobi. The gun was powerful enough to stop most things that went on four legs and it gave him comfort. He slept.

The mist swirled heavy as soup and the fire had dwindled to coals when he woke. Branches crackled and a black shape, the girth of a bison or a full grown rhino, moved between shadows. It stopped and twisted an incomprehensibly configured head to survey the camp. The beast huffed and continued into the brush. Luke Honey remained motionless, breath caught in his throat. The huff had sounded like a chuckle. And for an instant, the lush, shrill wheedle of panpipes drifted through the wood. Far out amid the folds of the savanna, a lion coughed. A hyena barked its lunatic bark, and much closer.

Luke Honey started and his eyes popped open and he couldn't tell the world from the dream.

Lord Bullard spent much of the predawn hours hunkered in the bushes, but by daybreak he'd pulled himself together, albeit white-faced and shaken. Mr. Wesley's condition, on the other hand, appeared to have worsened. He didn't speak during breakfast and sat like a lump, chin on his chest.

"Poor bastard looks like hell warmed over," Mr. Williams said. He dressed in long johns and gun belt. He sipped coffee from a tin cup. A cigarette fumed in his left hand. "You might've done him in."

Luke Honey rolled a cigarette and lighted it. He nodded. "I saw a fight in a hostel in Cape Town between a Scottish dragoon and a big Spaniard. The dragoon carried a rifle and gave the Spaniard a butt stroke to the midsection. The Spaniard laughed, drew his gun and shot the Scot right through his head. The Spaniard died four days later. Bust a rib and it punctures the insides. Starts a bleed."

"He probably should call it a day."

"Landscomb's a sawbones. He isn't blind. Guess I'll leave it to him."

"Been hankerin' to ask you, friend—how did you end up on the list? This is a mighty exclusive event. My pappy knew the Lubbock Wellocs before I

was born. Took me sixteen years to get an invite here. And a bribe or two."

"Lubbock Wellocs?"

"Yep. Wellocs are everywhere. More of them than you shake a stick at—Nevada, Indiana, Massachusetts. Buncha foreign states too. Their granddads threw a wide loop, as my pappy used to say."

"My parents lived east of here. Over the mountains. Dad had some cousins in Ransom Hollow. They visited occasionally. I was a kid and I only heard bits and pieces… the men all got liquored up and told tall tales. I heard about the stag, decided I'd drill it when I got older."

"Here you are, sure enough. Why? I know you don't give a whit about the rifle. Or the money."

"How do you figure?"

"The look in your eyes, boy. You're afraid. A man like you is afraid, I take stock."

"I've known some fearless men. Hunted lions with them. A few of those gents forgot that Mother Nature is more of a killer than we humans will ever be and wound up getting chomped. She wants our blood, our bones, our goddamned guts. Fear is healthy."

"Sure as hell is. Except, there's something in you besides fear. Ain't that right? I swear you got the weird look some guys get who play with fire. I knew this vaquero who loved to ride his pony along the canyon edge. By close, I mean rocks crumbling under its hooves and falling into nothingness. I ask myself, what's here in these woods for you? Maybe I don't want any part of it."

"I reckon we all heard the same story about Mr. Blackwood. Same one my Daddy and his cousins chewed over the fire."

"Sweet Jesus, boy. You don't believe that cart load of manure Welloc and his crony been shovelin'? Okay then. I've got a whopper for you. These paths form a miles wide pattern if you see 'em from a plane. World's biggest pentagram carved out of the countryside. Hear that one?"

Luke Honey smiled dryly and crushed the butt of his cigarette underfoot.

Mr. Williams poured out the dregs of his coffee. He hooked his thumbs in his belt. "My uncle Greg came here for the hunt in '16. They sent him home

in a fancy box. The Black Ram Lodge is first class all the way."

"Stag get him?"

The rancher threw back his head and laughed. He grabbed Luke Honey's arm. There were tears in his eyes. "Oh, you are a card, kid. You really do buy into that mumbo-jumbo horse pucky. Greg spotted a huge buck moving through the woods and tried to plug it from the saddle. His horse threw him and he split his head on a rock. Damned fool."

"In other words, the stag got him."

Mr. Williams squeezed Luke Honey's shoulder. Then he slackened his grip and laughed again. "Yeah, maybe you're on to something. My pappy liked to say this family is cursed. We sure had our share of untimely deaths."

The party split again, Dr. Landscomb and the British following Scobie and the dogs; Mr. Welloc, Luke Honey and the Texans proceeding along a parallel trail. Nobody was interested in the lesser game; all were intent upon tracking down Blackwood's Baby.

They entered the deepest, darkest part of the forest. The trees were huge and ribboned with moss and creepers and fungi. Scant light penetrated the canopy, yet brambles hemmed the path. The fog persisted.

Luke Honey had been an avid reader since childhood. Robert Louis Stevenson, M. R. James, and Ambrose Bierce had gotten him through many a miserable night in the tarpaper shack his father built. He thought of the fairy tale books at his aunt's house. Musty books with wooden covers and woodblock illustrations that raised the hair on his head. The evil stepmother made to dance in red hot iron shoes at Snow White's garden wedding while the dwarves hunched like fiends. Hansel and Gretel lost in a vast, endless wood, the eyes of a thousand demons glittering in the shadows. The forest in the book was not so different from the one he found himself riding through.

At noon, they stopped to take a cold lunch from their own saddlebags as this was beyond the range of the lodge staff. Arlen trotted from the forest, dodgy and feral as a fox, to report Scobie picked up the trail and was hoping to soon drive the stag itself from hiding. Dr. Landscomb and the British were in hot pursuit.

“Damn,” Mr. Williams said.

“Aw, now that Limey’s going to do the honors,” Mr. Briggs said. “I wanted that rifle.”

“Everybody wants that rifle,” Mr. McEvoy said.

Mr. Williams clapped his hands together. “Let’s mount up, *muchachos.* Maybe we’ll get lucky and our friends will miss their opening.”

“The quarry is elusive,” Mr. Liam Welloc said. “Anything is possible.”

The men kicked their ponies to a brisk trot and gave chase.

An hour later, all hell broke loose.

The path crossed a plank bridge and continued upstream along the cut bank of a fast moving stream. Dogs barked and howled and the shouts of men echoed from the trees. A heavy rifle boomed twice. No sooner had Luke Honey and his companions entered a large clearing with a lagoon fed by a waterfall, did he spy Lord Bullard and Mr. Wesley afoot, rifles aimed at the trees. Dr. Landscomb stood to one side, hands tight on the bridle of his pony. Dead and dying dogs were strewn everywhere. A pair of surviving mastiffs yapped and snarled, muzzles slathered in foam, as Scobie wrenched mightily at their leashes.

The Brits’ rifles thundered in unison. Luke Honey caught a glimpse of what at first he took to be a stag. Yet something was amiss about the shape as it bolted through the trees and disappeared. It was far too massive and it moved in a strange, top-heavy manner. Lord Bullard’s horse whinnied and galloped blindly through the midst of the gawking Americans. It missed Luke Honey and Mr. Williams, collided with Mr. McEvoy and knocked his horse to the ground. The banker cursed and vaulted from the saddle, landing awkwardly. His horse staggered upright while Mr. Wesley’s mount charged away into the mist in the opposite direction. Mr. Briggs yelled and pulled at the reins of his mount as it crow-hopped all over the clearing.

“What the hell was that?” Williams said, expertly controlling his horse as it half-reared, eyes rolling to the whites. “Welloc?”

Mr. Liam Welloc had wisely halted at the entrance and was supremely unaffected by the debacle. “I warned you, gentlemen. Blackwood’s Baby is no tender doe.”

Mr. McEvoy had twisted an ankle. He sat on a rock while Dr. Landscomb tended him. Scobie calmed his mastiffs and handed their leashes to Mr. Liam Welloc. He took a pistol from his coat and walked among the dogs who lay scattered and broken along the bank of the lagoon and in the bushes. He fired the pistol three times.

No one spoke. They rubbed their horses’ necks and stared at the blood smeared across the rocks and at the savaged corpses of the dogs. Scobie began dragging them into a pile. A couple of flasks of whiskey were passed around and everyone drank in morbid silence.

Finally, Mr. Williams said, “Bullard, what happened here?” He repeated the question until the Englishman shuddered and looked up, blank-faced, from the carnage.

“It speared them on its horns. In all my years… it scooped two dogs and pranced about while they screamed and writhed on its antlers.”

“Anybody get a clear shot?”

“I did,” Mr. Wesley said. He leaned on his rifle like an old man. “Thought I nicked the bugger. Surely I did.” He coughed and his shoulders convulsed. Dr. Landscomb left Mr. McEvoy and came over to examine him.

Mr. Liam Welloc took stock. “Two horses gone. Five dogs killed. Mr. McEvoy’s ankle is swelling nicely, I see. Doctor, what of Mr. Wesley?”

Dr. Landscomb listened to Mr. Wesley’s chest with a stethoscope. “This man requires further medical attention. We must get him to a hospital at once.”

Scobie shouted. He ran back to the group, his eyes red, his mouth twisted in fear. “Arlen’s gone. Arlen’s gone.”

“Easy, friend.” Mr. Williams handed the older man the whiskey and waited for him to take a slug. “You mean that boy of yours?”

Scobie nodded. “He climbed a tree when the beast charged our midst. Now he’s gone.”

“He probably ran away,” Mr. Briggs said. “Can’t say as I blame him.”

“No.” Scobie brandished a soiled leather shoe. “This was lying near the tracks of the stag. They’ve gone deeper into the wood.”

“Why the bloody hell would the little fool do that?” Lord Bullard said, slowly returning to himself.

“He’s a brave lad,” Scobie said and wrung the shoe in his grimy hands.

“Obviously we have to find the kid,” Luke Honey said, although he was unhappy about the prospect. If anything, the fog had grown thicker. “We have four hours of light. Maybe less.”

“It’s never taken the dogs,” Scobie said so quietly Luke Honey was certain no one else heard.

There was a brief discussion regarding logistics where it was decided that Dr. Landscomb would escort Mr. Wesley and Mr. McEvoy to the prior evening’s campsite—it would be impossible to proceed much farther before dark. The search party would rendezvous with them and continue on to the lodge in the morning. Luke Honey volunteered his horse to carry Mr. Wesley, not from a sense of honor, but because he was likely the best tracker of the bunch and probably also the fleetest of foot.

They spread into a loose line, Mr. Liam Welloc and Mr. Briggs ranging along the flanks on horseback, while Luke Honey, Scobie, and Mr. Williams formed a picket. Mr. Williams led his horse. By turns, each of them shouted Arlen’s name.

Initially, pursuit went forth with much enthusiasm as Lord Bullard had evidently wounded the stag. Its blood splattered fern leafs and puddled in the spaces between its hoof prints and led them away from the beaten trails into brush so thick, Luke Honey unsheathed his Barlow knife and hacked at the undergrowth. Mosquitoes attacked in swarms. The light dimmed and the trail went cold. A breeze sighed, and the ubiquitous fog swirled around them and tracking soon became a fruitless exercise. Mr. Liam Welloc announced an end to the search on account of encroaching darkness.

Mr. Williams and Luke Honey stopped to rest upon the exposed roots of a dying oak tree and take a slug from Mr. Williams’ hip flask. The rancher

smoked a cigarette. His face was red and he fanned away the mosquitoes with his hat. “Greg said this is how it was.”

“Your uncle? The one who died?”

“Yeah, on the second go-around. The first time he came home and talked about a disaster. Horse threw a feller from a rich family in Kansas and broke his neck.”

“I reckon everybody knows what they’re getting into coming to this place.”

“I’m not sure of that at all. You think you know what evil is until you look it in the eye. That’s when you really cotton to the consequences. Ain’t no fancy shooting iron worth any of this.”

“Too early for that kind of talk.”

“The hell it is. I ain’t faint-hearted, but this is a bad fix. The boy is sure enough in mortal danger. Judging what happened to them dogs, *we* might be in trouble.”

Luke Honey had no argument with that observation, preoccupied as he was with how the fog hung like a curtain around them, how the night abruptly surged upon them, how every hair of his body stood on end. He realized his companion wasn’t at his side. He called Mr. Williams’ name and the branches creaked overhead.

An unearthly stillness settled around him as he pressed his hand against the rough and slimy bark of a tree. He listened as the gazelle at the waterhole listened for the predators that deviled them. He saw a muted glow ahead; the manner of light that seeped from certain fogbanks on the deep ocean and in the depths of caverns. He went forward, groping through coils of mist, rifle held aloft in his free hand. His racing heart threatened to unman him.

Luke Honey stepped into a small grove of twisted and shaggy trees. The weak, phosphorescence rose from the earth and cast evil shadows upon the foliage and the wall of thorns that hemmed the grove on three sides. A statue canted leeward at the center of the grove—a tall, crumbling marble stack, ghastly white and stained black by moss and mold, a terrible horned man, or god. This was an idol to a dark and vile Other and it radiated a palpable aura of wickedness.

The fog crept into Luke Honey's mouth, trickled into his nostrils, and his gorge rebelled. Something struck him across the shoulders. He lost balance and all the strength in his legs drained and he collapsed and lay supine, squashed into the wet earth and leaves by an imponderable force. This force was the only thing keeping him from sliding off the skin of the Earth into the void. He clawed the dirt. Worms threaded his fingers. "Get behind me, devil," he said.

The statue blurred and expanded, shifting elastically. The statue was so very large and its cruel shadow pinned him like an insect, and the voices of its creators, primeval troglodytes who'd dwelt in mud huts and made love in the filth and offered their blood to long dead gods, whispered obscenities, and images unfolded in his mind. He threshed and struggled to rise. A child screamed. The cry chopped off. A discordant vibration rippled over the ground and passed through Luke Honey's bones—a hideous clash of cymbals and shrieking reeds reverberated in his brain. His nose bled.

Fresh blood is best, the statue said, although it was Luke Honey's mouth that opened and made the words. *Baby blood, boy child blood. Rich red sweet rare boy blood. What, little man, what could you offer the lord of the dark? What you feeble fly?* His jaw contorted, manipulated by invisible fingers. His tongue writhed at the bidding of the Other. A choir of corrupt angels sang from the darkness all around—a song sweet and repellent, and old as Melville's sea and its inhabitants. Sulfurous red light illuminated the fog and impossible shapes danced and capered as if beamed from the lens of a magic lantern.

Luke Honey turned his head sideways in the dirt and saw his brother hoeing in the field. He saw himself as a boy of fourteen struggling with loading a single shot .22 and the muzzle flash exactly as Michael leaned in to look at the barrel. Luke Honey's father sent him to live in Utah and his mother died shortly thereafter, a broken woman. The black disk of the moon occulted the sun. His massive .416 Rigby boomed and a bull elephant pitched forward and crumpled, its tusks digging furrows in the dirt. Mother stood in the entrance of the tent, wings charred, her brilliant nimbus dimmed to reddish flame. Arlen regarded him from the maze of thorns, his face slack with horror. "Take me instead," Luke Honey said through clenched teeth, "and be damned."

You're already mine, Lucas. The Other cackled in lunatic merriment.

The music, the fire, the singing, all crashed and stopped.

Mr. Williams leaned over him and Luke Honey almost skewered the man. Mr. Williams leaped back, staring at the Barlow knife in Luke Honey's fist. "Sorry, boy. You were having a fit. Laughing like a crazy man."

Luke Honey clambered to his feet and put away the knife. His scooped up his rifle and brushed leaves from his clothes. The glow had subsided and the two men were alone except for the idol which hulked, a terrible lump the darkness.

"Sweet baby Jesus," Mr. Williams said. "My uncle told me about these damned things, too. Said rich townies—that weren't followers of Christ, to put it politely—had 'em shipped in and set up here and there across the estate. Gods from the Old World. There are stories about rituals in the hills. Animal sacrifices and unnatural relations. Stories like our hosts told us about the Blackwoods. To this day, folks with money and an interest in ungodly practices come to visit these shrines."

"Let's get away from this thing," Luke Honey said.

"Amen to that." Mr. Williams led the way and they might've wandered all night, but someone fired a gun to signal periodically, and the two men stumbled into the firelight of camp as Mr. Liam Welloc and Mr. McEvoy were serving a simple dinner of pork and beans. By unspoken agreement, neither Luke Honey or Mr. Williams mentioned the vile statue. Luke Honey retreated to the edge of the camp, eyeing Mr. Liam Welloc and Dr. Landscomb. As lords of the estate there could be no doubt they knew something of the artifacts and their foul nature. Were the men merely curators, or did they partake of corrupt ceremonies by the dark of the moon? He shuddered and kept his weapons close.

Dr. Landscomb and Lord Bullard had wrapped Mr. Wesley in a cocoon of blankets. Mr. Wesley's face was drawn, his eyes heavy-lidded. Lord Bullard held a brandy flask to his companion's lips and dabbed them with a handkerchief after each coughing jag.

"Lord Almighty," Mr. Williams said as he joined Luke Honey, a plate of beans in hand. "I reckon he's off to the happy hunting grounds any minute now."

Luke Honey ate his dinner and tried to ignore Mr. Wesley's groans and coughs, and poor Scobie mumbling and rocking on his heels, a posture that betrayed his rude lineage of savages who went forth in ochre paints and limed hair and wailed at the capriciousness of pagan gods.

There were no stories around the fire that evening, and later, it rained.

Mr. Wesley was dead in the morning. He lay stiff and blue upon the lean-to floor. Dr. Landscomb covered him with another blanket and said a few words. Lord Bullard wept inconsolably and cast hateful glances at Luke Honey.

"Lord Almighty," was all Mr. Williams could repeat. The big man stood near the corpse, hat in hand.

"The forest is particularly greedy this season," Mr. Liam Welloc said. "It has taken a good Christian fellow and an innocent child, alas."

"Hold your tongue, Mr. Welloc!" Scobie's face was no less contorted in grief and fury than Lord Bullard's. He pointed at Mr. Liam Welloc. "My grandson lives, an' I swear to uproot every stone an' every tree in this godforsaken forest to find him."

Mr. Liam Welloc gave Scobie a pitying smile. "I'm sorry, my friend. You know as well as I that the odds of his surviving the night are slim. The damp and cold alone…"

"We must continue the search."

"Perhaps tomorrow. At the moment, we are duty bound to see our guests to safety and make arrangements for the disposition of poor Mr. Wesley's earthly remains."

"You mean to leave Arlen at the tender mercy of… Nay, I'll have none of it."

"I am sorry. Our duty is clear."

"Curse you, Mr. Welloc!"

"Master Scobie, I implore you not to pursue a reckless course—"

"Bah!" Scobie made a foul gesture and stomped into the predawn gloom.

Mr. McEvoy said, “The old man is right—we can’t just quit on the kid.”

“Damned straight,” Mr. Briggs said. “What kind of skunks would we be to abandon a boy while there’s still a chance?”

Dr. Landscomb said, “Well spoken, sirs. However, you can hardly be expected to grasp the, ah, gravity of the situation. I assure you, Arlen is lost. Master Scobie is on a Quixotic mission. He won’t find the lad anywhere in Wolfvale. In any event, Mr. McEvoy simply must be treated at a hospital lest his ankle grow worse. I dislike the color of the swelling.”

“Surely, it does no harm to try,” Mr. Briggs said.

“We tempt fate by spending another minute here,” Mr. Liam Welloc said. “And to stay after sunset… This is impossible, I’m afraid.” The incongruity of the doctor’s genteel comport juxtaposed with his apparent dread of the supernatural chilled Luke Honey in a way he wouldn’t have deemed possible after his experiences abroad.

“Tempt fate?” Mr. Briggs said. “Not stay after sunset? What the hell is that supposed to mean, Welloc? Boys, can you make heads or tails of this foolishness?”

“He means we’d better get ourselves shut of this place,” Mr. Williams said.

“Bloody right,” Lord Bullard said. “This is a matter for the authorities.”

Mr. Briggs appeared dumbfounded. “Well don’t this beat all. Luke, what do you say?”

Luke Honey lighted a cigarette. “I think we should get back to the lodge. A dirty shame, but that’s how I see it.”

“I don’t believe this.”

“Me neither,” Mr. McEvoy said. His leg was elevated and his cheeks shone with sweat. His ankle was swaddled in bandages. “Wish I could walk, damn it.”

“You saw what that stag did to the dogs,” Lord Bullard said. “There’s something unnatural at work and I’ve had quite enough, thank you.” He wiped his eyes and looked at Luke Honey. “You’ll answer for Wes. Don’t think you won’t.”

“Easy there, partner,” Mr. Williams said.

Luke Honey nodded. “Well, Mr. Bullard, I think you may be correct. I’ll answer for your friend. That reckoning is a bit farther down the list, but it’s on there.”

“This is no time to bicker,” said Mr. Liam Welloc. “Apparently we are in agreement—”

“Not all of us,” Mr. Briggs said, glowering.

“—Since we are in agreement, let’s commence packing. We’ll sort everything out when we return to the house.”

“What about Scobie?” Mr. Briggs said.

“Master Scobie can fend for himself,” Mr. Liam Welloc said, his bland, conciliatory demeanor firmly in place. “As I said, upon our return we will alert the proper authorities. Sheriff Peckham has some experience in these matters.”

Luke Honey didn’t believe the sheriff, or anybody else, would be combing these woods for one raggedy kid anytime soon. The yearly sacrifice had been accomplished. This was the way of the world; this was its beating heart and panting maw. He’d seen such offerings made by tribes in the jungles, just as his own Gaelic kin had once poured wine in the sea and cut the throats of fatted lambs. If one looked back far enough, all men issued from the same wellspring and every last one of them feared the dark as Mr. Liam Welloc and Dr. Landscomb and their constituency in Ransom Hollow surely did. Despite the loathsome nature of their pact, there was nothing shocking about this arrangement. To propitiate the gods, to please one’s lord and master was ever the way. That expert killers such as the English and the Texans and, of course, himself, served as provender in this particular iteration of the eternal drama filled Luke Honey’s heart with bitter amusement. This wry humor mixed with his increasing dread and rendered him giddy, almost drunken.

Mr. Wesley’s body was laid across the saddle of Luke Honey’s horse and the company began the long trudge homeward. The dreary fog persisted, although the rain had given out for the moment.

“I hope you don’t think I’m a coward,” Mr. Williams said. He rode beside Luke Honey who was walking at the rear of the group.

Luke Honey didn’t speak. He pulled his collar tight.

“My mama raised me as a God fearin’ boy. There’s real evil, Mr. Honey. Not that existential crap, either. Last night, I felt somethin’ I ain’t felt before. Scared me spitless.” When Luke Honey didn’t answer, Mr. Williams leaned over and said in a low voice, “People got killed in that grove, not just animals. Couldn’t you feel it coming off that idol like a draft in a slaughter yard? I ain’t afraid of much, but Bullard’s right. This ain’t natural and that kid is a goner.”

“Who are you trying to convince?” Luke Honey said, although the question was more than a little self referential. “The hunt is over. Go back to Texas and dream away the winter. There’s always next year.”

“No, not for me. My uncle made that mistake. Next year, I’ll go to British Colombia. Or Alaska. Damned if I know, but I know it won’t be Ransom Hollow.” Mr. Williams clicked his tongue and spurred his mount ahead to rejoin the group.

Later, the company halted for a brief time to rest the animals and allow the men to stretch their legs. The liquor was gone and tempers short. When they remounted, Luke Honey remained seated on a mossy boulder, smoking his last cigarette. His companions rode on, heads down and dispirited, and failed to notice his absence. They disappeared around a sharp bend.

Luke Honey finished his cigarette. The sun slowly ate through the clouds and its pale light shone in the gaps of the foliage. He turned his back and walked deeper into the woods, into the darkness.

The shrieks of the mastiffs came and went all day, and so too the phantom bellows of men, the muffled blasts of their weapons. Luke Honey resisted the urge to cover his ears, to break and flee. Occasionally, Scobie hollered from an indeterminate distance. Luke Honey thought the old man’s cries sounded more substantial, more of the mortal realm, and he attempted to orient himself in their direction. He walked on, clutching his rifle.

Night came and he was lost in the endless forest.

A light glimmered to his left, sifting down through the black gallery to illuminate a figure who stood as if upon a stage. Mr. Wesley regarded him,

hat clasped to his navel in both hands, hair slick and shining. His face was white. A black stain spread across the breast of his white shirt. He removed a pair of objects from inside his hat and with an insolent flourish tossed them into the bushes short of Luke Honey. Dr. Landscomb stepped into view and took Mr. Wesley by the elbow and drew him into the shadows. The ray of light blinked out of existence.

The objects were pale and glistening and as Luke Honey approached them, his heart beat faster. He leaned close to inspect them and recoiled, his courage finally buckling in the presence of such monstrous events.

Luke Honey blindly shoved his way through low hanging branches and spiky undergrowth. His clothes were torn, the flesh of his hands and face scratched and bleeding. A rifle fired several yards away. He staggered and shielded his eyes from the muzzle flash and a large animal blundered past him, squealing and roaring. Then it was gone and Scobie came tearing in pursuit and almost tripped over him. The old man swung a battered lantern. He gawked at Luke Honey in the flat yellow glare.

Scobie's expression was wild and caked in dirt. His face was nicked and bloody. He panted like a dog. He held his rifle in his left hand, its bore centered on Luke Honey's middle. In a gasping voice, he said, "I see you, Bill."

"It's me, Luke Honey."

"What's your business here?"

"I came to help you find the boy." He dared not speak of what he'd so recently discovered, an abomination that once revealed was certain to drive the huntsman into raving madness. At this range Scobie's ancient single shot rifle would cut Luke Honey in twain.

"Arlen's gone. He's gone." Scobie lowered the weapon, his arm quivering in exhaustion.

"You don't believe that." Luke Honey said with a steadiness born of staring down savage predators, of waiting to pull the trigger that would drop them at his feet, of facing certain death with a coldness of mind inherent to the borderline mad. The terror remained, ready to sweep him away.

“I’m worn to the bone. There’s nothing left in me.” Scobie seemed to wither, to shrink into himself in despair.

“The stag is wounded,” Luke Honey said. “I think you hit it again, judging from the racket.”

“It don’t matter. You can’t kill a thing like that.” Scobie’s eyes glittered with tears. “This is the devil’s preserve, Mr. Honey. Every acre. You should’ve gone with the masters, got yourself away. We stayed too long and we’re done for. He only pretends to run. He’ll end the game and come for us soon.”

“I had a bad feeling about Landscomb and Welloc.”

“Forget those idiots. They’re as much at the mercy of Hell as anyone else in Ransom Hollow.”

“Got anything to drink?” Luke Honey said.

Scobie hung the lantern from a branch and handed Luke Honey a canteen made of cured animal skin. The canteen was full of sweet, bitter whiskey. The men took a couple of swigs and rested there by the flickering illumination of the sooty old lamp. Luke Honey built a fire. They ate jerky and warmed themselves as the dank night closed in ever more tightly.

Much later, Scobie said, “It used to be worse. My grandsire claimed some of the more devout folk would drag girls from their homes and cut out their innards on them stone tablets you’ll find under a tree here or there.” His wizened face crinkled into a horridly mournful smile. “An’ my mother, she whispered that when she was a babe, Black Bill was known to creep through the yards of honest folk while they slept. She heard his nails tap-tapping on their cottage door one night.”

Luke Honey closed his eyes. He thought again of Arlen’s pitiful, small hands severed at the wrists and discarded in the brush, a pair of soft, dripping flowers. He heard his companion rise stealthily and creep away from camp. He slept and awakened to the old man kneeling at his side. Scobie’s face was hidden in shadow. Luke Honey smelled the oily steel of a knife near his own neck. The man reeked of murderous intent. He wondered where Scobie had been, what he had done.

Scobie spoke softly, “I don’t know what to do. I’m a man of God.”

“Yet here we are. Look who you serve.”

“No, Mr. Honey. The hunt goes on an’ I don’t matter none. You’re presence ain’t my doing. You bought your ticket. I come because somebody’s got to stand up. Somebody’s got to put a bullet in the demon.”

“The price you’ve paid seems steep as hell, codger.”

Scobie nodded. He remained quiet for a while. At last he said, “Come, boy. You must come with me now. He’s waiting for us. He whispered to me from the dark, made a pact with me he’d take one of us in return for Arlen. I promised him you, God help me. It’s a vile oath and I’m ashamed.”

“Oh, Scobie.” Luke Honey’s belly twisted and churned. “You know how these things turn out. You poor, damned fool.”

“Please. Don’t make me beg you, Mr. Honey. Don’t make me. Do what’s right for that innocent boy. I know the Lord’s in your heart.”

Luke Honey reached for Scobie’s arm, and patted it. “You’re right about one thing. God help you.”

They went. There was a clearing, its bed layered with muck and spoiled leaves. Unholy symbols were gouged into the trees; brands so old they’d fossilized. It was a killing ground of antiquity and Scobie had prepared it well. He’d improvised several torches to light the shallow basin with a ghastly, reddish glare.

Scobie took several steps and uttered an inarticulate cry, a glottal exclamation held over from his ancestors. He half turned to beckon and his face was transformed by shock when Luke Honey smashed the butt of his rifle into his hip, and sent him stumbling into the middle of the clearing.

Luke Honey’s eyes blurred with grief, and Michael’s shade materialized there, his trusting smile disintegrating into bewilderment, then inertness. The cruelness of the memory drained Luke Honey of his fear. He said with dispassion, “My hell is to testify. Don’t you understand? He doesn’t want me. He took me years ago.”

Brush snapped. The stag shambled forth from the outer darkness. It loomed above Scobie, its fur rank and steaming. Black blood oozed from gashes along its flanks. Beneath a great jagged crown of antlers its eyes were black, its teeth yellow and broken. Scobie fell to his knees, palms raised in

supplication. The stag nuzzled his matted hair and its long tongue lapped at the muddy tears and the streaks of drying blood upon the man’s upturned face. Its muzzle unhinged. The teeth closed and there was a sound like a ripe cabbage cracking apart.

Luke Honey slumped against the bole of the oak, the rifle a dead, useless weight across his knees, and watched.

The Siphon

This version taken from *The Beautiful Thing That Awaits Us All and Other Stories*, 2013

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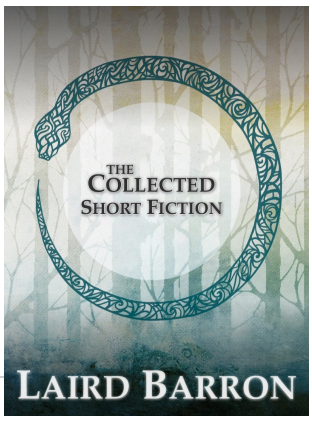


Lancaster graduated from college in 1973 and landed a position in the sales department of a well known Wichita company that manufactured camping gear. He hated the outdoors but was naturally manipulative, an expert at affecting sincerity and bright-eyed chumminess of variable intensity. Despite this charm that wowed the socks off clients, he never made much headway with management or co-workers, two species immunized against snake oil and artifice.

Around Halloween of 1989, he accepted a job as a field representative with another Wichita firm called Roache Enterprises. His farewell party was attended by four department associates, a supervisor, and a custodian. The supervisor brought a single layer white cake and somebody spiked the punch with bourbon. His boss projected an old staff picture on the slide panel-Lancaster isolated in the foreground, his expression a surprised snarl, uncomfortably reminiscent of the candid shot of an infamous serial killer who'd been electrocuted by the state of Florida earlier that year. Lancaster was better looking, much smoother, were such a thing possible.

The conference room was brown and yellow, the tables and chairs yellow, bleached by fluorescent strips. Later that institutional light would seep into Lancaster's dreams. The hum of the lights. The cake, a rib bone scalloped to the marrow. The lights. The hum. He dreamed of the two women he'd loved and left when he was young and reckless, before he'd matured and steadied, before he'd learned to maintain his great control. He dreamed how their pleas and imprecations were abruptly stilled, how their faces became empty as the buzzing moon.

He would awaken from such nightmares and grope for the special wooden box in its secret place in the dresser. The box represented that window into

a brief, agonized segment of his early post college years; the red blur he refused to examine except in moments of dire want. A small lacquered coffer, dead black with a silver clasp. Dead black and cool to the touch, always cool as if stored in refrigerator rather than a drawer. Lancaster needed the box, its contents, needed them with a fevered intensity because they fulfilled the hunger at his core, because the switch that had originally been thrown to motivate and necessitate his acquisition of these trophies clicked off as arbitrarily as it had been clicked on and with it his will to pursue, to physically enact his desires. Thus he'd sift through the box of treasures, move his lips in wordless naming of each precious trinket until his mind quieted. Until the humming of the fly in the mantle of the light ceased. Until the humming of the moon ceased and he could sleep again.

Roache Enterprises was founded in 1963 during the height of the Cold War when it manufactured guidance control systems for cruise missiles. Modern era Roache retained 170,000 full-time employees around the globe. The company dealt in electronics; plastics; chemical engineering; asphalt; irrigation systems; sugar, rubber, and cotton plantations; data mining; modular housing; and a confounding array of other endeavors. The Roache Brothers were five billionaires who'd retreated to South America compounds and the French Riviera. The public hadn't seen them-except for annual state of the corporation recorded video addresses-in twenty years. A board of regents ran the show from headquarters in France, India, Scotland, England, and of course, Kansas.

Lancaster spent months abroad, jetting between continents. He'd married once, a union only a mayfly might've envied, which had resulted in a daughter, Nancy, now an adult living in Topeka whom he saw on Christmas and sometimes Easter. The rest of his family was scattered: Father dead, mother living in a trailer park in Tennessee, and two sisters in Washington State whom he had no real contact with since college.

Incapable of love, its intricacies and necessities a mystery to him, he was fortunately content with the life of a gentleman bachelor and disappeared into the wider world. His job was generally one of information gathering and occasional diplomacy—a blackmailer or flatterer, depending upon the

assignment. Charlatans were kings in the corporate culture of Roache, a culture that was the antithesis of the blue collar aesthetic of his former company. Lancaster excelled in this niche and Roache rewarded him accordingly. He possessed apartments in Delhi and Edinburgh, and standing reservations at luxury hotels in places such as Denmark, Paris, and New York. He'd come a long way since peddling camp stoves and sleeping bags.

The National Security Agency reached out to Lancaster in 1991 while he vacationed at White Sands Beach, Hawaii. He was invited aboard a yacht owned by the friend of the friend of a former client who did business with Roache Enterprises on a piecemeal basis. The yacht-owner was named Harold Hoyte. Hoyte and his wife Blanche, a ripe and sensual ex B-movie actress who'd starred under an assumed name in a couple of Russ Meyer's films, owned an import business; this provided cover for their activities as senior operatives of the Agency, the bulk of which revolved around recruitment and handling.

They had dinner with two other couples on the deck of the *Ramses*, followed by wine and pills and hideously affected slow-dancing to Harold Hoyte's expansive collection of disco. Harold went ashore, ostensibly to locate a couple of fellow revelers who'd gotten lost on the way to the party, and Blanche promptly led Lancaster into the master suite and seduced him to KC and the Sunshine Band on a king-size bed washed in the refracted shimmer of a glitter ball.

Harold Hoyte made a pitch for Lancaster to join the NSA in the wee hours of the morning as they shared the last joint and the dregs of the scotch. Lancaster declined. A double life simply wasn't his style. He told Hoyte he had a good thing going with Roache and who needed a poisoned umbrella tip jammed in one's ass, anyway?

Harold Hoyte smiled and said, no harm no foul. If he changed his mind… And an unlabeled video cassette of Lancaster fucking Mrs. Hoyte with theatrical flourishes soon arrived at the front desk of his hotel. That a duplicate might anonymously find its way to the Roache corporate offices was implicit. Roache was protective of its business associations large and small. They wouldn't take kindly to Lancaster's salacious escapades with the wife of a client, considering the ruin such an affair could bring to a lucrative contract were Mr. Hoyte to muster and bluster mock outrage at

being cuckolded by a company representative. The Hoytes had caught him in the old honey trap. He didn't feel too angry—it was their field of expertise. Besides, spying might agree with him.

Three weeks later, he was officially an asset of the NSA. He soon learned several colleagues at Roache Enterprises moonlighted for the government. The company had eyes everywhere the US needed them. It added a new and unpredictable wrinkle to Lancaster's routine, although the life of an occasional spy didn't prove particularly thrilling. Certainly it resembled nothing of bestselling potboilers or action flicks. Mostly it came down to taking a few pictures, following strangers for a day or two, and occasionally smuggling a memory stick or something as low-tech as a handwritten code across international borders.

The upside was it motivated him to get into shape and take Judo for a while—weren't spies supposed to know Judo in case of a scrape? He'd watched the original *Manchurian Candidate* eight times; the version where Sinatra got into a knockdown drag-out fight with a foreign agent. To be on the safe side, he also bought a .38 automatic and got accurate with it at the range. He went unarmed abroad because of travel restrictions, but carried it almost everywhere while in the States. He continued to carry until his enthusiasm cooled and he stuck the gun in a shoebox and forgot it. Around then he also stopped attending Judo classes.

One night in the wake of 9/11 and the untimely deaths of forty-seven Roache employees who'd staffed an office in the North Tower, he got together for drinks with another asset high up the food chain at corporate. They were drunk when Lancaster asked him what he thought of running errands for the Agency. The exec shook his head, eyes bleary from too many bourbons. "Not what I expected. Pretty fucking boring, you ask me. I guess I'm kind of taken aback by all the satanists."

The Aughts passed.

Following a six month lull of contact with the NSA, Lancaster received a call from his current handler, Tyrone Clack. Clack took over for the Hoytes when they sailed on toward retirement and their golden years back in 2003.

All communications occurred via phone—Lancaster had never even seen a photo of the agent. Clack informed him that the Agency was interested in acquiring intelligence on a naturalized citizen named Dr. Lucas Christou. The good doctor, who'd been born in Athens and transplanted to the US during adolescence, was a retired chair of the anthropology department of some tiny school near Kansas City called Ossian University. He'd become reclusive since then, seldom appearing in public, content to withdraw from society to an isolated estate.

Christou had emerged from his hermitage and would be hosting a foreign national named Rawat, a minor industrialist entering the US on business with Roache. All that was required of Lancaster was to take the doctor's measure, get to know him a bit, soften him up for possible future developments. No further explanation for the agency's interest was forthcoming and Lancaster didn't press. None of it titillated him anymore. He'd do as requested and hear nary a peep afterward. A typical, menial task. A mindless task, in fact.

Considering his superstar status as a professional schmoozer, the scheme didn't prove difficult. He returned to Wichita and manipulated events until a big cheese at corporate asked him pretty please to entertain a small party that had come to town for a tour of a cluster of empty corporate properties outside the city. Strip mall-style office buildings that had been hastily built then left in quasi abandonment.

The guests included the potential client, Mr. Rawat and his American companion Kara, and a bodyguard named Dedrick; the Cooks, a moneyed New York couple who'd previously partnered on land deals with Mr. Rawat; and, of course, Dr. Christou.

All of this was explained by Vicky Diamond, an administrative assistant to the Big Cheese himself. Ms. Diamond was a shark; Lancaster noted this first thing. Youngish, but not really, dark hair, dark eyes, plenty of makeup to confuse the issue, a casual-chic dresser. Lancaster thought she smiled so much because she liked to show her teeth. She handed him dossiers on the principles—Mr. Rawat and the Cooks—and suggested an itinerary. He appreciated how she put her fingerprints on the project without over-committing. Should things progress smoothly, she'd get much of the credit.

If the sales pitch tanked, Lancaster would find himself on the hook. He liked her already.

The group met on Friday morning for breakfast at a French café, followed by a carefully-paced tour of downtown landmarks. Lunch was Italian, then onward to the Museum of Treasures and a foray to quaint Cowtown, which delighted the Cooks and, more importantly, Mr. Rawat, and was at least tolerated by the others.

Lancaster had slipped Cowtown into the schedule simply to tweak Ms. Diamond as he suspected she'd fear the excessive display of Midwest provincialism. Judging from the glare he received, his assessment was on the mark. He'd softened the blow by reserving one of six tables at a tiny hole-in-the-wall restaurant that served authentic Indian cuisine rivaling anything he'd tasted in Delhi or Mumbai. Mr. Rawat was a cool customer in every sense of the word. Elegant in his advancing years, his black hair shone like a helmet, his aged and hardened flesh gleamed like polished wood. His watch was solid gold. Even the goon Dedrick who lurked in the background, ready to intercept any and all threats, was rather classy via proximity with his long, pale hair and black suit and fancy eyeglasses that slotted him as a burly legal professional rather than a bodyguard.

Mr. Rawat raised a glass of Old Monk to Lancaster and tipped him a slight wink of approval. Dining went into the nine o'clock hour, after which they repaired to the historic and luxurious Copperhill Hotel and made for the lounge, a velvet and mirrored affair with double doors open to the grand ballroom.

Everything was going exactly as Lancaster planned until Dr. Christou and Mr. Rawat began discussing world folklore and demonology with a passion that turned heads at nearby tables. This vein was central to Dr. Christou's studies. He'd published numerous works over the course of four decades in academia, the most noteworthy a treatise called *The Feral Heart,* which documented cases of night terrors and the mythology of the living dead in the Balkans and the Greek Isles. Mr. Rawat had come across the book shortly after its publication in 1971 and written a lengthy letter taking the

professor to task for his fanciful reportage. This initiated what developed into a lifelong correspondence and apparently adversarial friendship.

Dr. Christou was broad through shoulders and chest. His large head was bald except for a silvery fringe, and his mustache and beard were white streaked with black. He wore a vintage suit and three rings—two on the left hand, one on the right. He drank copiously; Canadian Club. *These days a proper Greek drinks scotch, but as a culture-strapped American, a Canadian import will suffice.* Lancaster couldn't help but notice he resembled the bluff and melodramatically distinguished actors who populated Saturday night horror features of yesteryear; a physically imposing relative of Christopher Lee. The doctor said to Mr. Rawat, "I don't pretend to know the truth, my friend. There are cracks in the world. These cracks are inhabited by… marvels undreamt of in our philosophies."

"We have known each other for an age," Mr. Rawat said. "and I am still uncertain where the truth ends and the bullshit begins with you."

"I think the subject of night terrors is fascinating," Mrs. Cook said. She and her husband were slightly younger than Mr. Rawat and Dr. Christou, around Lancaster's age, a year or two shy of senior discounts and social security checks. The couple were gray and heavyset, habitual tans as faded as ancient tattoos. Mr. Cook wore a heavy tweed jacket, and his wife a pattern dress and pearls that were slightly behind modern fashion. She'd drunk her share of gin and tonic.

"Francine majored in literature," Mr. Cook said, gesturing with his tumbler of Johnnie Walker Blue. "The classics—Henry James, Wilde, Menken, Camus, Conrad. *That* lot."

"Actually, I prefer Blackwood and Machen during the proper season. When the leaves are falling and the dark comes early and stays. *The Horla*, by Maupassant. There's a fine one regarding sleep paralysis and insanity."

"A demon that creeps into the bedchamber and squats upon its victim's chest. That particular legend is prevalent in many cultures," Dr. Christou said.

"An oldie, but a goodie," Lancaster said, beginning to feel the weight of his liquor. Ms. Diamond slashed him with a look.

“And thoroughly debunked,” Mr. Rawat said. “Like *deja vu* and near-death experiences. Hallucinations, hypnogogic delusions. Nothing sinister. No sign of the numinous, nor the unholy for that matter.”

“You were so much more fun as a lad,” Dr. Christou said, smiling.

“I come by my skepticism honestly. There was a time I believed supernatural manifestations possible. Lamias, *vorvolakas*, lycanthropes, the Loch Ness Monster—”

“*Rakshasa*.”

“Yes, *Rakshasa*. UFOs, spoon-bending, levitation, spontaneous combustion—”

“Spontaneous erections!”

“What, you don’t believe in *Rakshasas*?” A sallow, pinch-faced man in a white jacket at the adjoining table leaned forward and partially across Lancaster so the others could hear him. His tie dipped into Lancaster’s mostly empty glass of Redbreast. The man was of indeterminate age and smelled of first-class cigarettes and designer cologne. His skull was oddly pointed and hairless, dull flesh speckled with liver spots. He’d styled his mustache into a Fu Manchu. “Sorry, sorry. How rude of me. I’m Gregor Blaylock. These are my comrades Christine, Rayburn, and Luther. My research team.” The trio of graduate students were handsome and smartly dressed—the men in jackets and turtlenecks, the woman in a tunic and skirt. Both men were lean and sinewy; sweat glittered on their cheeks. The woman wore bright red lipstick. Her dark skin was flawless. She stroked Mr. Blaylock’s shoulder, a pairing of youth and age that was eerily congruous to that of Mr. Rawat and his escort Kara.

Dr. Christou laughed and stood to shake hands. “Gregor! Good to meet in person at last. What great coincidence has brought us together?”

“Oh, you know there are no coincidences, Lucas.”

Ms. Diamond quickly made further introductions as the men pushed the tables together so the newcomers might join the festivities. Lancaster wasn’t certain of the new peoples’ nationalities. Even listening to Mr. Blaylock speak proved fruitless to solving that riddle. Perhaps Asian heritage and a European education accounted for the man’s exotic features

and the flattening of his accent. It was odd, very odd. Evidently, Mr. Blaylock was also an anthropology professor, and another of Dr. Christou's legion of fans and correspondents, but details weren't forthcoming, just the gibberish of mutual recollection that left all save its intimates in the fog. He finally gave in and said, "If I may be so bold, where are you from? Originally, that is."

Mr. Blaylock said, "Why, I was born here. We all were born here." He inclined his head to include his companions. Something in the curl of his lip, his archness of tone, indicated *here* didn't necessarily refer to Kansas or the heartland, but rather the continent, if not the world itself. So Mr. Blaylock was that smug species of academic who delighted in *double entendre* and puns. Asshole. Lancaster drained his whiskey, masking a sneer.

Ms. Diamond pressed against Lancaster as a spouse might and muttered, "What the hell are you doing?" She maintained her pearly shark smile for the audience.

"It's a fair question," Mr. Blaylock said, as if he'd somehow overheard the whisper. "Mr. Lancaster, you've been around the block, yeah?"

"I've heard the owl hoot," Lancaster said. "And the Sri Lankan Frogmouth too."

"I hear you. You Limeys speak your minds. You're inquisitive. No harm. I approve."

"Not *much* harm," Ms. Diamond said.

"You are exceedingly generous, Mr. Blaylock. But I'm American."

"Oh, yeah? Odd. You must spend loads of time on the island."

Dr. Christou said, "Our kind patron heard a Frogmouth hoot. Have you seen a *Rakshasa*, perhaps?"

"Not in Kansas," Mr. Blaylock said.

"What's a *Rakshasa*?" Mr. Cook said.

"It's a flesh-eating monster from Indian mythology, dear," Mrs. Cook said. "There are packs of them roaming about in classical Indian literature, such as the *Mahabharata*."

Dr. Christou said, “I’ve not encountered one either, nor do I know anyone with firsthand knowledge. However, in 1968 I visited a village on the Greek island of Aphra and interviewed the locals, including a Catholic priest, who were thoroughly convinced *vorvolakas* stalked them. The priest showed me a set of photographs taken by a herdsman that were rather convincing.”

“Ha! The ones in *The Feral Heart* were far from convincing, old friend. Very, very far.”

“Certainly the lighting was poor. Sunset, so the contrast of light and darkness was jarring. Of course, shrinking them down to fit the page also compromised the quality.”

“Was there a creature in the pictures? How exciting,” Mrs. Cook said.

“Eh? You haven’t read his *famous* book?” Mr. Rawat said.

“In fact, yes. I read books for the words, not the pictures.”

“There were at least four creatures, actually,” Dr. Christou said. “The shepherd spied them emerging from a crypt in the hills at dusk. The man was on a bluff and they glared up at him. Horrifying once you realize what you’re dealing with, I assure you.”

“The goat herder took a picture of *something*,“ Mr. Rawat said. “To settle the matter, the film should be sent to a laboratory and analyzed.”

“Alas, that is impossible,” Mr. Christou said. “I returned them to the priest after they were copied into the book. The village was abandoned in 1970, its inhabitants scattered along the mainland. What became of the herdsman or the film remains a mystery.”

“Rubbish,” Mr. Rawat said. “I’ve studied the photos a million times. Our nameless shepherd captured images of youthful vagabonds. Perhaps grave-robbers at rest, if one is inclined toward drama.”

“No mystery about the missing film,” Mr. Blaylock said. “When the Greek government repatriated the villagers to the mainland I’m sure such materials were confiscated or lost. You mentioned a priest—perhaps the Church spirited away the evidence for secret study. Too convenient?”

“Too conspiratorial, I’d think,” Lancaster said. “Most of the tinfoil hats amongst the clergy were exiled to the fringes by the ’70s, were they not?”

“You are familiar with the Eastern Church?” Mr. Rawat said, raising an eyebrow.

“There was this girl I met in Athens who’d gone astray from ecclesiastical upbringing in a big way. She gave me the history lesson. The infighting and intrigue, the conspiracies.”

“I bet,” Ms. Diamond said.

“Life is full of little conspiracies,” Dr. Christou said and looked at Mr. Blaylock. “Imagine running into *you* here of all places. I thought you lived in British Colombia.”

Mr. Cook said, “What were those other critters you mentioned earlier? A *vorvo*-something?” He sounded bored.

“Vorvolakas,” Mr. Rawat said.

“Vorvo-whatsis?”

“Blood-sucking undead monster from Greek mythology, dear,” Mrs. Cook said. “There are scads of them in the old writings of The Eastern Church.”

“There’s also that Boris Karloff movie,” Mr. Rawat said. He smiled coolly and sipped his rum. “You can watch the whole thing on the internet. I’m certain my esteemed colleague has done so in the name of research.”

Lancaster said, “Val Lewton’s film. Scared me pantless when I was a wee lad. What a great old flick.”

“I like you more and more. *Yia mas*!” Dr. Christou knocked back yet another Canadian Club.

“Val Lewton,” Mr. Cook said, his glazed eyes brightening. “Now you’re talking. My dad owned a chain of theaters. Lewton was a hell of an auteur, as the kids say.”

“Oh, honey.” Mrs. Cook smiled with benign condescension and patted her husband’s cheek so it jiggled. “Val Lewton? Really? Goodness.”

“Hellenic vampire tradition is quite rich,” Mr. Christou said. “The damned rise from their graves—day or night—and creep through villages, rapping on doors, tapping on windows, imitating the cries of animals and children. It is said one must never answer a door after dark on the first knock.”

Mrs. Cook said, “As I understand it, Grecian vampires are actually more akin to shape changers. Lycanthropes and what have you.”

“Quite right, dear lady! Quite right!” Dr. Christou said. “The Balkan Wars led to a minor usurpation by the Slavic vampire myth of the Greek antecedent. Or, I should say, a co-option, though who ultimately co-opted whom is open to debate. Ah, you would’ve been a much brighter assistant than the clods I was assigned on my expeditions. And lovelier to boot!”

“Oh, hush, Doctor,” Mrs. Cook said, casually patting her hair as she cast about for the waiter. “Seriously, although you’re the expert, doesn’t it seem plausible that these legends—the Rakshasa, the lycanthropes and vampires, the graveyard ghouls, the horrors of Dunsany, Moses, and Lovecraft, are variations on a theme?”

“If by plausible you mean impossible,” Mr. Rawat said.

“Certainly,” Mr. Blaylock said. “And a hundred other beasties from global mythology. Each iteration tailored to the traditions and prejudices of individual cultures. However, as Mr. Rawat so elegantly declared, it’s rubbish.” He smiled slyly. “Except for ghosts. The existence of ghosts is a theory I can get behind.”

There were more rounds of drinks accompanied by tales of werewolves, vampires, and other things that went bump in the night. An orchestra appeared and began to play classics of the 1930s. The Cooks ventured unsteadily onto the dance floor, and gallant Mr. Rawat escorted Ms. Diamond after them—she, ramrod stiff and protesting to no avail. Mr. Rawat’s continental chauvinism doubtless nettled her no end.

Lancaster excused himself to visit the restroom. He pissed in the fancy urinal and washed his hands and dried them on a fancy scented towel. He checked his watch in the lobby, decided to risk a few moments away from the party, and ducked into the stairwell and lighted a cigarette. Moments later Mr. Blaylock and Dr. Christou barged through the door, drinks in hand, Dedrick hot on their heels, a pained expression replacing his customary stoicism. Dr. Christou and Mr. Rawat immediately lighted cigarettes. Both smoked Prima Lux. “Ah, great minds!” the doctor said, grinning at Lancaster, who covered his annoyance with a friendly mock salute.

A few minutes later, cigarettes smoked and drinks drunk, everyone headed back to the table. Lancaster did the gentlemanly deed of holding the door. Dr. Christou hesitated until the others had gone ahead. He said in a low voice, “I confess an abiding fondness for Boris Karloff and Val Lewton. Anyone who holds them dear is first class by my lights.” The doctor leaned slightly closer to Lancaster, scorching him with whiskey breath. “In recent years I’ve become convinced the priest of Aphra was duped by the shepherd. Those cemetery photographs were surely a hoax. Which is a damned shame because I think there truly was an extraordinary event occurring in that village.” He laid his very large hand upon Lancaster’s shoulder. This drunken earnestness would’ve been comical except for the glimmer of a tear in the corner of the aged scholar’s eye. “Please extend my apologies to our fair company. That last drink was a bridge too far. I’m off to my quarters.”

Lancaster wondered if the evening could possibly become more surreal. He watched in bemusement as the big man trundled away and boarded an elevator.

He returned to the ballroom where Ms. Diamond sat alone at the table. She watched the others dance, her mouth sullen. He sat next to her and, feeling expansive from the booze, said, “I have a bottle of twelve year-old scotch back at the Chateau.” His blue eyes usually had an effect on women. He was also decently-muscled from a regimen of racquetball and swimming. He assiduously colored the gray from his expensively-styled hair, and all of this combined to smooth the rough edges of advancing age, to create the illusion of a man in his late forties, the urbane, chisel-jawed protagonist of sex-pill commercials rather than a paunchy playboy with stretch marks and pattern baldness sliding into the sunset years. But Ms. Diamond was having none of it.

“I think you also probably have a dozen STDs,” she said. “Half of them exotic and likely incurable by fire.”

“Well, I don’t like to brag,” he said.

The group dispersed, shuffling off to their respective rooms, and Lancaster shook the hands of the men and kissed the hands of the ladies—Kara’s skin tasted of liquor, and Mrs. Cook’s was clammy and scaly and bitter. He

glanced at her face, and her eyes were heavy-lidded, her thick mouth upturned with matronly satisfaction at his discomfort.

Lancaster hailed a cab and made it to his townhouse a few minutes after 2 a.m. Nothing spectacular—two bedrooms, a bathroom with a deep whirlpool tub and granite everything, and a kitchen with wood cabinets and digital appliances. In the living room, lush track lighting, thick carpet and a selection of authentic-looking Monet and Van Gogh knockoffs, a half dozen small marble sculptures imported from Mediterranean antique shops, a gas fireplace and modest entertainment center, and of course, a wet bar tucked opposite bay windows with a view of the river.

He wasn't in a steady relationship. His previous girlfriend, a Danish stewardess twenty-five years his junior, had recently married a pilot and retired to, 'make babies', as she put it in the Dear John email. He dialed the escort service and asked for one of the girls he knew. The receptionist informed him that person was unavailable, so he requested Trina, a moderately attractive brunette who'd stayed over a few months back, and this time he was in luck, his Girl Friday would be along in forty-five minutes. He dropped his coat into an oversized leather chair, hit the remote to dim the lights, a second time to ignite a romantic blaze in the hearth, and once more to summon the ghost of Jeff Healey through speakers concealed behind a pair of African elephant statuettes.

The drink and Ms. Diamond's dragon lady glare had worked him over. That and the bizarre dinner chatter and the raw emotion flowing from ponderous Dr. Christou. Lancaster brought forth the special box, currently hidden upon a shelf inside a teak cabinet that housed his cigars and collection of foreign coins. Tonight he needed to gaze within the box, to drink it with his eyes, to satiate the nameless desire that welled from his deepest primordial self.

He sat for a while in the thrall of conflicting emotions. The ritual calmed him less than usual. He shut the box and returned it to its cubby. His breath was labored.

Cigarette in one hand, a fresh glass of scotch sweating in the other, he sank into the couch and closed his eyes. The doorbell went *ding-dong*! and his

eyes popped open. The glass was dry and the cigarette had burned perilously near his knuckle. He set the glass on the coffee table and crushed the cigarette in the ashtray. At the door it occurred to him the bell had only rung once, and it bothered him somehow. He peered through the spy-hole and saw nothing but the empty walk, yellow and hazy under the streetlamp light. The doorknob throbbed with a low voltage current that tingled momentarily and vanished.

He opened the door and Trina-the-escort popped up like a jack-in-the-box, still fumbling with a compact that had slipped from her stylish red-lacquer handbag. She wore a slick black dress and had dyed her hair blonde since their last encounter. “Hiya,” she said and caught his tie in the crook of her finger as she stepped past him from the dark into the light. As the door swung closed, a breeze ruffled his hair and he shivered, experiencing the unpleasant sensation that he’d forgotten something important, perhaps years and years ago. His brain was fairly pickled and the girl already slid out of her dress and the strange unease receded.

When they’d finished, Trina kissed his cheek, dragged on their shared cigarette, then briskly toweled herself and ducked into the bathroom. He dialed her a taxi and lay in the shadows listening to the shower, the edge off his drunkenness and succumbing to exhaustion as he recalled the faces of his dinner guests—Dr. Christou’s haunted eyes, Mr. Blaylock’s predatory smile, and Mr. Rawat cool and bland even as he dissected and debated. The others ran together, and uneasiness crept back in as his damp flesh cooled, as the red numerals of the alarm clock flickered in a warning. The girl reappeared, dressed, perfumed, and coifed with a polka-dot kerchief. She said she’d let herself out, call her again any time. He drifted away, and—

Ding-dong! He sat up fast, skull heavy. Only three or four minutes had passed, yet he was mostly anesthetized from the alcohol and overwhelming drowsiness. He waited for the next ring, and as he waited a chill seeped into his guts and he thought strange, disjointed thoughts. Why was he so nervous? The vein in his neck pulsed. Trina must’ve forgotten something. He rose and went to the door. As he turned the deadbolt, he experienced the inexplicable urge to flee. It was a feeling as powerful and visceral as a bout of vertigo, the irrational sense that he would be snatched into the darkness,

that he would meet one of Dr. Christou's unknowable marvels lurking in the cracks of the Earth.

Trina stepped back with a small cry when he flung the door open and stood before her, sweat dripping from his torso. A taxi idled on the curb. She regained her composure, although she didn't come closer. "Forgot my cell," she said. Dazed, he fetched her phone. She extended her hand as far as possible to snatch the phone. She hustled to the taxi without a goodbye or backward glance.

The canopy of the trees across the street shushed in the breeze, and fields littered with pockets of light swept into the deeper gloom like the crown of a moonlit sea. The starry night was vast and chill, and Lancaster imagined entities concealed within its folds gazing hungrily upon the lights of the city, the warmth of its inhabitants.

Lancaster was not an introspective man, preferring to live an inch beneath his own skin, to run hot and cold as circumstances required. Fear had awakened in him, stirred by God knew what. Imminent mortality? Cancer cells spreading like fire? The Devil staring at him from the pit? Momentarily he had the preposterous fantasy that this primitive terror wasn't a random bubble surfacing from the nascent tar of his primordial self, but an intrusion, a virus he'd contracted that now worked to unnerve and unman him.

Whatever the source, he was afraid to stand in the tiny rectangle of light that faced the outer darkness. That darkness followed him into sleep. The gnawing fear was with him too. The dark. The hum of the stars.

Lancaster arranged for a limousine driver named Ms. Valens to pick the party up in front of the hotel after lunch the next day. He suggested a helicopter for speed, but Dr. Christou had an aversion to flying in light aircraft—a train and bus man, was the good doctor. Mr. Rawat and the Cooks were traveling to the airport that evening immediately following the tour of the corporate property, so the chauffeur loaded their luggage, which included Mr. Cook's pair of golf bags and no less than five suitcases for Mrs. Cook. Lancaster chuckled behind his hand at Ms. Valens' barely

concealed expression of loathing as she struggled to heft everything into the trunk while Ms. Cook tutted and tisked and the muscular Dedrick stood impassively, watching nothing and everything at once.

The two-hour drive was along a sparsely-traveled stretch of secondary highway that lanced through mile upon mile of wheat fields and sunflower plantations. The sky spread black and blue with rolling storm clouds, and crows floated like gnats beneath the belly of a dog. Light distorted as it passed through the tinted windows and filled the passenger compartment with an unearthly haze.

Lancaster and Ms. Diamond poured champagne from the limousine bar: *A glass to celebrate surviving their hangovers*, Lancaster said. Dr. Christou took his with a couple of antacid tablets, and Kara refused, covering her mouth with exaggerated revulsion. The others finished the magnum of *Grand Brut* with the diffidence of draining a bottle of spring water. Lancaster had seldom witnessed such a tolerance for booze except when playing blackjack with the alkie barflies in Vegas backwaters during his wild and wooly college days. He checked the stock to estimate whether it would last until he got his charges onto the plane. It was going to be close. Ms. Diamond's eyes widened when she met his and he felt a smidgen of uncharacteristic pity for her distress.

Mr. Rawat took a sheaf of blueprints and maps from his gold-clasped leather briefcase and spread them across his knees. Mr. Cook and Ms. Diamond sat on either side of him. Their faces shone with the hazy light reflected from the paper. Lancaster's eyeballs ached. The scenery slid past like a ragged stream of photographic frames. He pondered the previous evening's gathering at the hotel. Mrs. Cook winked and knocked his knee under the table. Mr. Blaylock grinned, minus an eyetooth, and Christine, the voluptuous vamp, stroked Blaylock's shoulder, her nails denting the exquisite fabric of his dinner jacket. Luther and Rayburn were a blur, unimportant. Mr. Cook drank with the methodical efficiency of a man who'd rather face the scaffold than another day with his wife, and he smiled with the same, superficial cheer as Ms. Diamond did—probably a reflexive counter to deeper, darker impulses. Mr. Rawat debated Dr. Christou with a passion reserved for a lover, while fox-sharp Kara looked on with jaded boredom, and Lancaster wondered how close the men might actually be and

perhaps, perhaps the NSA thought to use them against one another, to leverage a clandestine affair, and damn, this trip might actually prove interesting. Lancaster snapped out of it. His sunglasses disguised the fact he'd dozed for a few moments, or so he hoped.

They arrived at the property, several acres of single-story, hi-tech buildings fronted by immaculately trimmed lawns and plum trees. The office sectors were divided by access lanes, the whole complex erected in the middle of nowhere, an island on an ocean of grain. A groundskeeping truck inched along about a quarter of a mile down the frontage road. Workers in orange jackets paced it on the sidewalk, blasting away with leaf blowers.

No sooner had her feet touched the pavement, Ms. Diamond launched into a rehearsed spiel, subtly leading Mr. Rawat, Dedrick, and the Cooks by the collective nose toward the nearest wall of glass. She unlocked a set of doors with a key card and they walked inside. Meanwhile, Kara squinted at the changeable sky and fussed with the brim of her hat while Dr. Christou stood in the shadow of the car, rubbing his skull and muttering. Lancaster called the catering company, gained assurances the team would arrive on schedule. Ms. Diamond had reserved tables at a restaurant in a town several miles away. He knew she'd underestimated the softness of this particular group—such people couldn't go five or six hours without food and booze, couldn't go without being waited upon hand and foot; so he'd hired one of the finer outfits in the city to prepare dinner and truck it to the site at approximately the time he figured the tour would be wrapping up.

"Had enough, have you?" Dr. Christou said. "Of our chums, I mean."

"Ms. Diamond has them in hand. I couldn't very well abandon you or the lovely Kara, could I?" Lancaster lighted a cigarette. The 'lovely' Kara had retreated into the limousine. He suspected she was raiding the olives. Poor dear was emaciated.

"I'd say you are more preoccupied keeping tabs on me than helping your colleague net that big fish pal of mine."

"You're happy, Mr. Rawat is happy. Or am I wrong? " Lancaster said, thinking fast, wondering if the doctor was cagier than he appeared. "I'm here to make certain everyone has as nice a trip as possible." He gestured at

the surrounding plains. “Got my work cut out for me. This is the kind of land only a farmer or Bible salesman could love.”

“I have a theory. It’s the land that makes people crazy, not their superstitions. Consider fundamentalist Islam and fundamentalist Christianity—then look around. Look at all this emptiness under a baleful fireball. Add a few uneducated peasants to the equation and v*oila*. Petri dish for lunacy.”

“Amber waves of grain far as the eye can see, and me without a drop of milk…”

The big man nodded, still rubbing his skull. “I knew a fellow in Tangiers during my callow and malleable youth. French Intelligence, retired. He *claimed* to be retired. A lovely, older man; quite affable, quite accommodating, charmingly effete. He always dressed in a suit and smoked *Gauloises* brunes. Kept a little black pistol in his dresser at the hotel—a Walther, as I recall. He spoke of enemies from the old days. You remind me a bit of him. “

“Except I don’t have enemies. As to the, ahem, French connection, my mother claims we are descended from the Huguenots—but isn’t that a socially acceptable variation of the asylum nuts claiming to be Napoleon reincarnate?”

The grounds crew stopped across the way. There were seven of them. They lighted cigarettes and leaned against their truck or sprawled in the grass and drank water from milk jugs. A young Mexican god shaded his eyes with his hand and smiled at Lancaster. The Mexican’s shoulders were broad and dark as burnt copper and his black hair fell in ringlets to his nipples. His chest and stomach rippled with the musculature of a bull. He unsnapped the cap on a jug and poured water over his head, a model pimping it hard in a rock video, and whipped his hair in a circle. Water flew everywhere. His teeth were white, white.

Dr. Christou followed Lancaster’s stare. He sighed and lighted a cigarette of his own. “I always enjoyed a cherry pipe. Had to quit—too *de trop* for a professor, chewing on a pipe stem. Damnable shame. You understand the power of perception, of course. I’ve accrued a fine, long list of enemies. My

work is eccentric enough without piling on cliché. Ah, how I loathe those fuckers in admin."

Lancaster laughed, unbalanced by Christou's sortie and disliking the sensation intensely. He said, "An amazing coincidence, running into your colleague last night."

"Indeed. Blaylock wasn't… He wasn't as I expected him to be. We've corresponded for years. I thought… Well, goes to show, doesn't it? How meager our understanding of the human heart."

"Only the shadow knows."

"What a chestnut! Is that how you get through life, Mr. Lancaster? A sense of detachment and an arsenal of wry witticisms?"

"I'm not the best at small talk."

"Nonsense—that's why they sent you. You are an *expert* at small talk, a maestro at manipulating the inconsequential to your design. I'm hardly offended—fascinated, rather."

The clouds kept rolling and the light changed and changed, darkening from red and orange to purple, and a damp breath moved across the land, but it didn't rain. The air was supercharged and Lancaster tasted a hint of ozone. "Here comes the dinner wagon," he said as a van with a corporate logo departed the main road and cruised toward them.

"The irony is, my connections are retired or passed on," Dr. Christou said. "We've gotten old. If revolutionaries live long enough they become the establishment. The reef incorporates all discrete elements."

"Honestly, doctor, I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Right, then. For the record, you're wasting taxpayer money on me. Any information I've got isn't worth a drachma on the international market. Unless this is about revenge. Perhaps someone simply wishes to discredit me, to ruin my life's work."

Lancaster wasn't certain how to respond. Possibly the man was dangerous; perhaps he possessed contacts within some intelligence agency and had obtained Lancaster's files, maybe he knew the game. He kept his emotions in check, paid out a bit of rope. "Kind of paranoid, yeah? It's late in the day to achieve much by destroying you, isn't it, doc?"

“There are those who can be relied upon in their pettiness. You tell whomever it is, this isn’t worth their effort.” Dr. Christou drew on his cigarette butt. He knocked on the limousine window glass, coaxing Kara to emerge. Lancaster keyed the caterers into the central office, superintending their deployment and beachhead in the largest conference room he could find. As the team spread tablecloths and arranged the dinnerware, the overhead lights flickered and hummed and Lancaster stood with his cell flipped open, his brain in neutral.

“This place is spooky,” Kara said, hipshot against the edge of the nearest table. She popped a cocktail shrimp into her mouth. Her little black magpie eyes blinked, blinked. “I hate empty buildings. This place goes for miles. Just a bunch of endless hallways. Almost all the lights are off. It feels like somebody’s going to jump at me from the shadows. I dunno. Silly, huh?”

“Not so much,” Lancaster said, marshaling his strength to play the part. He patted her arm, mostly to comfort himself. He suppressed his anxiety and phoned Ms. Diamond and informed her supper awaited. There was a long, chilly silence before she thanked him and said her group would be along shortly.

The meal was passable by elitist standards: over-done Beef Wellington and too-boney Alaska king salmon. Lancaster’s choice of a vintage Italian wines and two chilled bottles of Chopin mollified the party. He stopped after one drink, his stomach knotted, shoulders bunched with rising tension. His guests were more than happy to drain the liquor—even Kara had overcome her squeamishness to hoist a glass of white wine. Mr. Rawat entered the proceedings wearing a dour expression matched only by Ms. Diamond’s, but after five or six shots of vodka he melted somewhat and began to joke with Dr. Christou. Meanwhile, the Cooks were inscrutable in their lukewarm affability, nibbling at the finger foods and consuming glasses of wine with impressive efficiency.

One of the caterers approached Lancaster with an apologetic nod and asked if he was expecting more company. Lancaster asked why, and the man said someone had buzzed the intercom at the entrance. He’d assumed a member of the party had gotten locked out, or the limo driver… Nobody was at the door. It was getting dark and some of the lights in the parking lot weren’t on, so he wasn’t able to see much. Lancaster didn’t know Ms. Valens’

number; he called the home office and got it from a secretary in human resources, then dialed the driver, intending to ask if she'd happened to see anyone on the grounds near the entrance. The call went straight to voicemail.

"A problem?" Ms. Diamond said as she sidled close, knifing him with one of her fake smiles. "And thank you ever so much for cutting me off at the knees by cancelling our reservations at a first class restaurant in favor of your little picnic stunt."

"They seem to be happily stuffing their faces," he said with his own contrived smile of collegiality. "No problem. The caterer thought someone was at the door. I'm checking with Ms. Valens now." Until that instant he'd toyed with the notion of asking Dedrick to make a parking lot sweep, dissuaded by the fellow's cold-fish demeanor and the suspicion he wasn't the type to run errands for anyone other than his master, Mr. Rawat. Lancaster pushed away from the table and turned his back on Ms. Diamond, went into the deep gloom of the hall, trailing his hand for a light switch. The front office was also murky, ankle-high illumination provided by a recessed panel of track lights in the baseboard paneling. The effect was spooky, as Kara said.

The night air lay cool upon his skin, tickled his nostrils with the scents of dust and chaff. A lone sodium lamp shone in an adjoining lot, illuminating itself and not much else. He approached the limo and noticed the chassis slightly shifting upon its shocks, and his eyes adjusted he discerned pants and a jacket discarded near the driver side door, and several empty pocket-sized liquor bottles gleaming in the starlight upon the asphalt. Ms. Valens straddled the young Mexican god as he sprawled across the hood. His giant's hands were on her ass, her fancy cap turned backward on his head. Lancaster sparked his lighter. They stared at him, drawn by the flame. "Don't mind me," he said, and lighted a cigarette. They didn't.

"What's going on out there!" Ms. Diamond said. Her voice carried from the entrance where she held the door as if afraid to venture forth. She sounded as melodramatic as an actress in a Quaker dress and bonnet, clutching her throat as she scanned the plains for a sneaking Comanche. "Lancaster, where the devil are you?" she said.

“Coming,” he said, and chuckled. He tapped his watch at Ms. Valens and walked away.

Ms. Diamond awaited him and they stood for a few moments in the unlighted office, listening to the loud voices and laughter from the conference room. She said, “Good thing it’s time to go—the booze is *finito*. Have you seen Kara? The supermodel.”

“Oh, that one,” he said.

“You haven’t been hitting the vodka hard enough to play the drunk asshole card. Got to hand it to you, Lancaster, this has turned into a cockup. Those bastards aren’t buying it. Rawat’s not interested in this land. I dunno what the deal is with the Mr. Howell and Lovey. You’re supposed to be the sweet-talker, but your head isn’t in the game. Now that silly bitch has taken a powder. Anyway, she’s mooned over you all day. Sweet little bulimic doe.”

“No need to waste charm since you’re not trying to sell *her* any swampland. She was binging on *hors devours*, last I saw. Might be a long ride back to the city.”

“Where the hell has she gotten to.”

“Likely in the john commencing the purging stage of the operation,” he said.

“No, I looked. Would you mind checking down the hall—bet she’s somewhere doing a line or having a crying jag or what the fuck ever. I’ve got to herd my sheep toward the exit before they start bleating in an insane frenzy of DT’s.”

“Sure,” he said, regretting it in the same breath. Kara had uttered a true statement: the halls were dark, dark. She wouldn’t have ventured into them alone, not with her apparently sincere apprehension. He located a central bank of dials in an adjoining passage and fiddled with them until a few domes winked on. Mercifully, each door was locked and he satisfied his obligation to search for the woman with a knock and a half-hearted inquiry —yoo-hoo, in there, lady? No? Moving on, moving on, even as the walls tightened like the throat of a cave burrowing into bedrock. His sweaty hand made it increasingly difficult to grasp door handles. He felt liquor in the

wires of his brain, but he hadn’t drunk enough, Ms. Diamond had noted it rightly, so why this haze, this disorientation?

Inside the employee break room, she lay in a fetal position on a table. A water-cooler bubbled in the corner. The refrigerator door was ajar and its white, icicle-chill light shone over her naked legs, white panties, and slip. Her upper body curved away, her face hidden in the sweep of hair. He slapped the wall switch and the overhead light flashed once and went dead. He approached and bent toward her still form.

She shuddered violently and raised herself on one elbow and laughed. Her arm unfolded like a blade. She seized his collar, pulled his face to hers. She kissed him hard with the taste of cold metal and all he could see was the refrigerator shivering in her eye, his own eye shivering in her eye. His eye rolled, rolled. This wasn’t Kara. The dimness had tricked him. “Be glad those lights didn’t come on,” Christine said, sounding different than he’d expected—she hadn’t spoken once during cocktails the previous evening at the hotel as she hung on Mr. Blaylock’s arm. Her voice was hoarse. “I suppose you’re wondering why I’ve called you here,” she said. A certain fluidity suggested multitudes beneath her skin. “The service door was open, by the way. That’s how we got in.”

“You killed small animals as a child, didn’t you?” Mr. Blaylock said. He stood before the gaping refrigerator, backlit so his face was partially hidden. Lancaster recognized the man’s voice, his peculiar scent. Mr. Blaylock soothed him. “That’s how it begins. Don’t be afraid. It’s not your turn. Not tonight. Really, you’ve been dead for years, haven’t you?” And to his left, past a doorframe that let yet further into the heart of the complex, more figures crowded. Presumably Mr. Blaylock’s acolytes from the dinner party.

Lancaster pulled free from Christine’s clutches. She spoke gibberish to him, lips and the sound from her lips moving asynchronously. He wheeled and plunged into the hall, blundered without sight or thought toward the conference chamber and the reassurance of a crowd. His mouth hurt on the inside. The caterers were already gone, leaving the room as antiseptic as they’d found it. The guests milled, awkward and surly in the absence of entertainment.

“Finally you appear!” Ms. Diamond said through her teeth. “Don’t believe in answering your phone. Damn it and hellfire, Lancaster! The natives are restless. We need to move on out.”

“Yeah, can we just go already?” Kara pressed tight against Mr. Rawat, wheedling in a daddy’s-little-girl tone. Her white cheeks were blotched pink. Lancaster’s tongue ached and he tried to recall what he’d meant to say, why those two disturbed him. Hadn’t he gone searching for her? The possibility seemed more remote by the second. He pressed a napkin to his lips, stemming the blood-flow, his short term memory erasing itself like a tape under a magnet.

He followed at the tail of the procession toward the parking lot. He glanced over his shoulder. A figure watched him from the darkened hallway. It slipped backward and vanished. Then he was letting the door close, a gate shutting on a sepulcher, and a few moments later he couldn’t recall why the taste of adrenaline mixed with the mouthful of wet copper.

The limousine and its running lights floated on the black surface of the night road. Farther on, the skyline of the city glowed like a bank of coals. Lancaster thought of his townhouse, the cold comfort of his large television and well-stocked bar, his firm bed, the expert and clinical charms of his high-dollar call girls. A voice whispered to him that he might not ever again step across the threshold. Blood continued to trickle from his tongue and he swallowed frequently.

Ms. Diamond’s knee brushed his own; her hands were primly folded in her lap. She smiled a glassy smile of defeat. Mr. Rawat lolled directly across the way, eyes closed. Kara’s cheek rested against the breast of his jacket. The Cooks reclined a few inches over, nodding placidly with the swaying of the car. Dedrick was in front, riding shotgun, hidden by the opaque glass.

Dr. Christou said to Mrs. Cook, “What do you mean, Francine? The land itself can possess sentience? The Great Father of the Native Americans writ in root and rock?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Cook. “Yes, that is exactly what I mean. Vortexes, dolmens, leylines, sacred monoliths, massive deposits of crystal and other

conducting minerals."

Dr. Christou shrugged. "How do you envision these anomalies affecting the larger environment—human society?"

"The natives amplified them with ceremonies and the construction of corresponding devices. Some acolytes yet perform the ancient rituals in the name of… various entities. Places of power become more powerful." The dome light was on. Mrs. Cook stared into the mirror of her compact. She patted her nose. "There's an ancient gridwork across this landscape. A scar. You can't feel it? How it plucks at you, siphons a tiny bit of your very life force? No, you can't. My disappointment is… Well, it's profound, Doctor. Profound indeed."

"But *you* can feel it," Dr. Christou said. He averted his gaze, grimacing, a man who'd gotten the scent of something rancid and might vomit.

"Yes. Yes! Why else would I let hubby-kins drag me to Kansas of all benighted places?"

Mr. Cook sneered. "I don't give a tinker's damn for office property, only that its foundation lies upon the rim of a vast, ancient wheel. We, this speck of a vehicle, travel across it like a flea on the back of an elephant."

"You see, my good doctor, we've done our homework. The old races made a number of heroic excavations." Mrs. Cook had applied a lot of powder. Her face was ghastly pale, except her lips, which resembled red earthworms. "Those excavations are hidden beneath the shifting stones and the sunflowers and the wheat. Yet they endure and exert significant force. A million bones ground to dust, a lake of blood leeched down, down into the earth, coagulated as amber. This good earth buzzes with a black radiation. Honey and milk to certain individuals."

"Right on," Mr. Cook said, idly adjusting his silvery ascot. He licked his lips at Mrs. Cook as she snapped shut the compact.

"Besides the Serpent Intaglio, I'm unaware of any geoglyphs in this region. Even if these geoglyphs of yours exist… Comanche, Arapahoe, Kickapoo, Kaw… None of them were terraformers on the scale you suggest." Dr. Christou was rubbing his skull again. A red splotch grew livid on his brow.

“Not the new tribes,” Mrs. Cook said. “Rather the civilizations that ruled here when this continent was still fused to Asia.”

“Back, back, back,” Mr. Cook said. “Only two continents in those days. Plus the polar caps. A wee bit before our time, admittedly.”

Lancaster surfaced from his own disjointed thoughts and began to process the exchange. Cold bright recollection smashed through his mind, a dousing of ice water, although he only experienced the visceral epiphany in the abstract, unable to comprehend the nature of its import. He said with practiced and patently false calmness, “Mr. Rawat, how did you come to learn of the Roache property? Someone brought it to your attention. Your investors, or someone in your employ? You have a department devoted to mergers and acquisitions.”

Ms. Diamond casually dug an elbow into Lancaster’s ribs. Mr. Rawat opened one eye. “Byron and Francine. They prepared a prospectus.”

“Byron and I were vacationing in Portugal,” Mrs. Cook said. “The three of us happened to stay at the same hotel. One thing led to another, and another…”

“We became fast friends,” Mr. Rawat said.

“Bosom buddies,” Mr. Cook said, staring directly and unblinkingly at Lancaster. What had Ms. Diamond called him? Mr. Howell from *Gilligan’s Island*. Yeah, there was an uncanny resemblance here in the shifty gloom.

Lancaster glanced from the Cooks to Dr. Christou. “Last night, who started that conversation about monsters?” He knew even before anyone answered that his assumption Mr. Rawat or Dr. Christou chose the topic was in error. They’d merely carried it along. He remembered kissing Mrs. Cook’s hand the previous evening, its repellent flavor of sweet, rotting fruit and underlying acridness. She’d been inside his mind before that, though, been inside all of their heads, that was her power. Even now her likeness floated in his waking mind, whispering to him how it was, how it would be. A river of blood, the sucking of living marrow—

Mrs. Cook’s bright smile widened. “*Monsters* fascinate me to no end.” She leaned forward and grasped Dr. Christou’s thigh as if propositioning a would-be lover. “We’ve read all of your books, Doctor.”

“We’ve come a long way for this,” Mr. Cook said. “There are some friends we’d like to introduce to you.”

Dr. Christou’s face slackened. He made an inarticulate sound from the back of his throat. Finally, he mastered himself and said to Lancaster, “Do you understand what’s happening? My god, Lancaster. Tell me you understand.”

Lancaster hesitated and Mrs. Cook cackled, head thrown back, throat muscles bunching.

Mr. Cook glanced out the window, then at his watch. “Oh, my. They’re waiting. I almost dared not hope… On with the show.” He loosened his tie.

The limo slowed and halted at a lonely four-way crossroads overseen by a traffic light dangling from a wire. The light burned red. A sedan was parked at an odd angle in the approaching right-hand lane, hazards flashing. A man and a woman dressed in evening clothes stood nearby, blank and stolid, awaiting rescue, perhaps. Lancaster squinted; the couple seemed familiar. As the limo began to roll forward through the intersection, Ms. Diamond said, “My god.” She pressed the intercom button and ordered Ms. Valens to pull over.

“Wait, don’t do it,” Dr. Christou said with the affect of a man heavily medicated; a man who’d chosen to give warning in afterthought when it was far too late.

“It’s them.” Ms. Diamond was already on her way out of the car and briskly walking toward the other motorists. Her heels clacked on the asphalt.

“What’s going on?” Mr. Rawat said, annoyed.

“Who are those people?” Kara said. Her face was sleepy and swollen.

Mr. Cook reached up and killed the dome light. From the shadows he said, “Victoria’s parents. They burned alive in a car crash. 1985. She has lived alone for so long.”

“Uh-uh,” Kara said. “That’s Casey Jean Laufenburg and her brother Lloyd. I went to high school with those guys.”

“Did they burn in a car accident too?” Dr. Christou said.

“Worse. Casey Jean’s in retail. It’s awful.” She gazed at Mr. Rawat imploringly. “Can we please keep going? Why do we have to stop?” She

sounded fully awake and afraid.

"Don't you want to say hello to your chums?" Mr. Cook said. "And you, doctor. Aren't you just positively consumed with fascination? This is how it happens. A lonely road at night. You come across someone familiar… an old friend, a brother, a sister, the priest from the neighborhood."

Mrs. Cook said, "It could be anyone, whomever is flitting around your brain. Here's the darkness, the haunted byway. Here in your twilight, you get to be part of the legend."

"That's enough booze for you, Ma'am," Lancaster said with forced cheer. Mrs. Cook released Dr. Christou and grasped Lancaster's forearm in a soft, almost effortless fashion that nonetheless reduced his resistance to that of a bug with a leg stuck on a fly strip. She opened herself and let him see. He was bodiless, weightless, sucked like smoke through a pipe stem toward a massive New England style house. He was drawn inside the house—marble tiles, sweeping staircases, bookcases, paintings—and into the master bedroom, the wardrobe, so cavernous and dim. An older couple were bound together in barbed wire. They dangled from a ceiling hook, their corpses liver-gray and bloodless, unspun hair dragging against the carpet. Eyes glazed, jaws slack. The real Cooks had never even made it out of their home.

The image collapsed and disintegrated and Lancaster reconstituted in the present, Mrs. Cook's, fingers clamped on his arm. He wrenched free and flopped back into his seat, strength drained. He said to Dr. Christou, "I think we've been poisoned." Someone had spiked the liquor, dosed the food with hallucinogens to soften the group, to break them down. Lancaster had read about this, the government experiments on Vietnam soldiers, the spritzing of subways with LSD in the 1970s. Mind control was the name of the game. "Doctor, this may be…" Lancaster shook his head to clear it, trying to decide exactly *why* an oppositional force would want to drug them. "It's a kidnapping." The motive seemed shockingly obvious—ransom. This carload of rich people tooling along the countryside could represent a payday for a suitably prepared criminal. He pressed the intercom and said, "There's a situation. Something's happening."

The glass whisked down and Dedrick swiveled in his seat. "Yes?"

“I believe we’re under attack. Please get Ms. Diamond. Drag her if necessary. Ms. Valens, the minute they’re in the vehicle get us the hell out of here.”

“Excuse me,” Mr. Rawat said, his reserve cracked, a raw nerve of terror exposed in his rapid blinking. Doubtless he’d seen his share of violence back in the homeland and was acutely aware of his vulnerability. “Mr. Lancaster, what do you mean we’re under attack? Dedrick?”

Dedrick’s stony countenance didn’t alter. “Sir, please wait.” He made no further comment while exiting the limo and striding toward Ms. Diamond and friends. His right hand was thrust inside his jacket. Mr. Rawat appeared shocked and Kara retrieved a baggie from her purse. She dry-swallowed a handful of particolored pills. Surprisingly, in the face of fear she kept quiet.

Lancaster squirmed around until he managed to get a view from the rear window of what was happening outside. He simultaneously opened his cell phone and dialed the Roache security department and requested a detail be dispatched to the location at once. He considered alerting his handler Clack of the situation, except in his experience communication with the NSA office was routed through multiple filters and ultimately reached an answering machine instead of a human being ninety percent of the time. It seemed a bad sign that the Cooks were unconcerned that he’d summoned the cavalry. Something great and terrible was descending upon this merry company of travelers. He said, “Who are you working for?”

“The Russians,” Mr. Cook said.

“The Bulgarians,” Mrs. Cook said. “The Scythians, the Picts, the Ostrogoths, the wicker-crowned God Kings of Ultima Thule. The Martians.”

“Mrs. Cook and I serve the whims of marvelous entities, foolish man,” Mr. Cook said. “The ones inhabiting the cracks in the earth, as the doctor is so fond of opining.”

That sounded like some kind of terrorist group to Lancaster. “Why here? Why not at the office where there’d be privacy?”

The Cooks exchanged blandly malevolent glances.

Dr. Christou mumbled, “Because we are near a place of power. A blood sacrifice requires a sacred foundation.”

“Or a profane foundation,” Mrs. Cook said.

“Like sex magic, the journey is half the fun.” Mr. Cook’s grin shone in the gloom.

“Really, you don’t want to know the who, how, and why,” Mrs. Cook said. “Alas, you will, and soon. We procure and thus persist.”

“Yes, we persist. Until the heat death of the universe.”

“Procure,” Dr. Christou said in a monotone. His flesh seemed to be in the process of deliquescing. Blood beaded on his forehead, squeezed in fattening droplets from the pores and rolled down his cheeks. Blood leaked from the corners of his eyes. Blood trickled from his sleeve cuffs and dripped in his lap. “Procure, what do you procure?”

Lancaster recoiled from the doctor. He had visions of anthrax, a vial of the Ebola virus, or one of a million other plagues synthesized in military labs the world over, and one of those plagues secreted in a handbag, a golf bag, wherever, now dosed into the food, the water, the wine, this virulent nastiness eating Dr. Christou alive. On a more fundamental level, he understood Christou’s affliction wasn’t any plague, manmade or otherwise, but the manifestation of something far worse.

“My goodness, doctor, they *are* eager for your humor to draw it at this distance,” Mr. Cook said, gleeful as a child who’d won a prize. He pretended to pout. “I was promised a taste. Gluttons!”

“Go on, sweetie,” Mrs. Cook said. “There is more than enough to spare.”

Mr. Rawat said, “My friend, my friend, you’re hurt!” He extended his hand, hesitated upon thinking better of the gesture.

The Cooks laughed, synchronized. A quantity of Dr. Christou’s blood was drawn in gravity-defying rivulets from where it pooled on the seat, first to the floorboard, then vertically against the window where it formed globules and rotated as if suspended in zero gravity. Mr. Cook craned his neck and sucked the globules into the corner of his mouth. “If ambrosia tastes so sweet upon a mortal tongue, how our patrons must crave it as that which sustains them!”

There was a thunderclap outside and a flash of fire. Ms. Diamond ran toward them. Her left high heel sheared and she did a swan dive onto the road. Dedrick also sprinted for the limo, moving with the grace and agility of a linebacker. He hurdled the fallen woman and blasted another round by twisting and aiming from under his armpit. Lancaster couldn't see the gun, but it had an impressive muzzle flash.

The mystery couple pursued on hands and knees, clothes shredded to reveal slick, cancerous flesh illuminated in the red glare of the traffic light. Their true forms unfolded and extended. The pair approached in a segmented, wormlike motion, and the reason why was due to their joining at hip and shoulder. Their faces had collapsed into seething pits; blowtorch nozzles seen front on, except spouting jets of pure black flame. In that moment Lancaster realized what had been leeching Dr. Christou from afar and he became nauseated.

As this disfigured conglomeration encroached upon Ms. Diamond, she convulsed in a pantomime of making a snow angel against the pavement. A heavy, wine-dark vapor trail boiled from her, and was siphoned into the funnel maws of the monstrous couple. She withered and charred. The others crawled atop and covered her completely.

The passenger compartment filled with the sour odor of feces. Mr. Rawat screamed and when Kara realized what was happening outside she screamed too. The gun cracked twice more, then Dedrick was in the front seat and bellowing for Ms. Valens to drive, drive, drive! and the chauffeur floored it while Dedrick's door was still open.

Lancaster didn't have the wits to react to the knife that appeared in Mr. Cook's hand. He gaped dumfounded while Mr. Cook nonchalantly reached out over his seatback and grasped Ms. Valens's hair and sliced her throat neat as could be. However, Dedrick continued to prove quite the man of action. He reached across Ms. Valens's soon to be corpse and took the wheel and kept the vehicle pointed down the centerline as he poked his large bore magnum pistol through the partition and fired. The bullet entered Mr. Cook's temple and punched a papier-mâché hole out the opposite side of his head. The report stunned and deafened Lancaster who raised his arms defensively against the splash. A chunk of bone and hair caromed from the ceiling, splatted against Dr. Christou's jacket breast and clung like a

displaced toupee. Now blood was everywhere—fizzing from Dr. Christou, misting the window in gruesome condensation, spurting from the chauffer's carotid artery, gushing from Mr. Cook's dashed skull, filling Lancaster's mouth, his nostrils, everywhere, everywhere.

Mrs. Cook ended Dedrick's heroics. She grasped the barrel and jerked and the gun exploded again, shattering the rear window. She made her other hand into a claw and gently raked drab, blue-painted nails across his face. One of his eyes burst and deflated, and the meat of his cheeks and jaw came unstitched as if kissed by a serrated saw blade and his face more or less peeled away like a decal. The man dropped the gun and pitched backward and out of view.

More blood. More blood. More screaming. It was chaos. The limousine left the road, bounced into the ditch and plowed a ragged line through a wheat field. The occupants were violently tossed about, except for Mrs. Cook who sat serene as a padishah on her palanquin.

The car ground to a halt. The passenger door opposite Lancaster opened and Mr. Blaylock stood there in an evening suit. He said to Mrs. Cook, "Chop chop, my dear. Dark is wasting." He bowed and was gone.

Mr. Cook's dagger had flown from his hand and lodged in the plush fabric of the seat between Lancaster and Dr. Christou. Lancaster caught his balance and snatched the knife, and it was heavy and cruelly curved and fit his hand most murderously. He stabbed it like an ice pick just beneath Mrs. Cook's breast. the blade crunched through muscle and bone and slid in to the hilt where it stuck tight. He tried to climb through the broken rear window. She cackled and clutched his ankle and yanked him to her as a mother retrieving her belligerent child. She kissed him and life drained from his limbs and he was paralyzed, yet completely aware. Completely aware for the hours that followed in the dark and desolate wheat field.

When it was over.

It would never be over. Lancaster knew that most intimately.

But when it was over for the moment, he walked to the lights on the road, pushed through the rough stalks, occasionally staggering as his shoe caught

on a furrow. Police car lights. Fire truck lights. The blue-white spotlights of low-cruising helicopters. The swinging and crisscrossing flashlight beams of the cops trolling the ditches. Roache had pulled out the stops.

He walked deep into the dragnet before somebody noticed that a civilian, pale as death in a blood-soaked suit, wandered amongst them.

The police whisked him directly to a hospital. Physically he was adequate—bumps and bruises and missing the tip of his tongue. Rather hale, all considered. The shrink who interviewed him wasn't convinced of Lancaster's mental stability and prescribed pills and a return visit. The police questioning didn't prove particularly grueling; nothing like the cop shows. Even Roache was eerily sympathetic. Company reps debriefed him regarding the car accident and promptly deposited a merit bonus in his bank account and arranged a vacation in the Bahamas. He didn't protest, didn't say much beyond responses to direct questions and these were flat, unaffected and ambiguous. He shuffled off to the islands, blank.

Following an afternoon that was one long stream of poolside martinis and blazing sun, Lancaster stumbled back to his hotel room and saw a man lounging in the overstuffed armchair by the bed.

"Hi, I'm Agent Clack, National Security Agency. We've chatted a few times on the phone." Agent Clack propped his feet on the coffee table. He smoked a cigarette. *Gauloises*.

The irony wasn't lost on Lancaster. "What are you, a college sophomore?" He walked to the bar and poured a vodka, pausing to gesture if his guest wanted one.

Agent Clack waved him off. Indeed, a young man—thirty tops. Pretty enough to model for a men's catalogue, he styled his wiry black hair into an impressive afro. He dressed the part of a tourist; a flower-print shirt, cheap camera slung around his neck, khaki shorts and open toe sandals. Lithe and well-built as a dancer, danger oozed from him, aw, shucks demeanor notwithstanding. "They like 'em young at HQ. But I assure you, my qualifications are impeccable. Had to snuff three dudes to get the job, kinda like James Bond. Jack Bauer is a pussy compared to yours truly. You're in good hands. Enough about me. How you holding up?"

"Am I being charged?"

“You responsible for the massacre? My bosses don’t think so. Neither do I. We’re looking for answers, is all.”

Lancaster shrugged and drank his vodka. “Did you find them?” He looked through the window when he asked, staring past the brilliant canopy of umbrella-shaded tables in the courtyard to the blue water that went on and on. “I told the cops where. The best I could remember. It was dark.”

“Yeah, we found the victims. Still hunting the murderers. They seem to have evaporated.” Agent Clack took a computer memory stick from his shirt pocket. “There are hundreds of pics on here. Satellite, aerial, plenty of close-ups of the action, well, the aftermath, in the field. It’s classified, but… Wanna see?”

“I was there.”

“Right, right. Still, things look a lot different from space. It’s kinda weird, though, that you were taken from the isolated Roache property. I mean, the remote offices were an ideal setup for a prolonged torture-murder gig.”

Lancaster thought of the disc of blackened earth he and the rest had been dragged to, a clearing the diameter of a small baseball diamond in the heart of the farmland, thought of what lay some yards beneath the topsoil, the subsoil, and the bedrock; an ossified ridge that curled in a grand arc, the spine of a baby Ouroboros, a gap between jaws and tail. He still smelled the blood and piss, the electric tang of pitiless starlight, the nauseating stench of his own terror. He said, “That dead ground, nothing has ever grown there. I imagine the Indians avoided it during their hunts, that the white farmers tilled around it and called it cursed. It’s older than old, agent. A ground for bloodletting. Places like it are everywhere.”

“I don’t give a shit about Stone Age crop circles. Who was behind the kidnapping. What was the motive. I’ll let you in on a secret—we got nothing, man. No claims or demands from terrorist groups, no chatter, nada. That isn’t how this goes. We *always* hear something.”

“Motive? There’s no motive. The ineffable simply *is*.”

“The ineffable,” Agent Clack said.

“The Cooks are in league with…”

“With who?” Agent Clack raised a brow.

“Evil.”

“Get outta here.”

“Abominations that creep along the byways of the world.”

“The big E, huh? Er, yeah, sure thing. I’m more into the concept lowercase e, the kind that lurks in the hearts of men. Anyhow, it wasn’t the Cooks you were entertaining. The real Cooks were murdered in their home several days before the incident in Kansas. But you knew that.”

“Yes. I was shown.”

Agent Clack blew a smoke ring. “And these other individuals. Gregor Blaylock and his entourage. The grad students…”

“Let me guess. Victims of a gruesome demise, identities stolen to perpetrate an elaborate charade.” Lancaster smiled; a brittle twitch.

“Not quite that dramatic. Guy’s nonexistent. So are his assistants. Our records show he, *someone*, corresponded with Christou over the years, but it’s a sham. There’s a real live prof named Greg Blaylock and my guess is whoever this other guy is, he simply assumed that identity as needed. It’s a popular con, black market brokers fixing illegals up with American citizens’ social security cards. Could be a dozen people using the same serial number, sharing parallel identities. Not too hard. Blaylock and Christou hadn’t actually met in person before that night. So.”

“Blaylock’s a cultist, a servitor. He was on the killing ground as a master of ceremonies. He… Blaylock coupled with Mrs. Cook while the nightmares fed on my companions, one by one.” Lancaster poured again, swallowed it quickly. Poured another, contemplated the glass as if it were a crystal ball. “Everybody was after Christou. The monsters liked his books. What about you and your cronies? Was he a revolutionary? Bomb an embassy back in the ’60s?”

“That’s eyes only spy stuff, grandpa. I’ll tell you this: the geezer mixed with politically active people during his career. The kind of dudes on no fly lists. He was once a consultant for the intelligence services of our competitors. Quid pro quo. Those bodies we examined… That was beyond, man. Way, way beyond. All the blood and organs removed. Mutilation. Looked like the victims were burned, but the autopsies said, no. A brutal,

sadistic, and apparently well-plotted crime. Yet the hostiles let you walk. There's a mystery my superiors are eager to get solved. Help me, man. Would ya, could ya shed some light on the subject?"

A sort of hysterical joy bubbled into Lancaster's throat. Yes, yes! To solve the ineffable mystery would be quite the trick. Certainly, Agent Clack despite his innocent face and schoolboy charm was cold and brutal, had surely seen and done the worst. Yet Lancaster easily imagined the younger man's horrified comprehension as the most vile and forbidden knowledge entered his bloodstream, began to corrode his shrieking brain with its acid. His lips curled. "Mrs. Cook called, a horrible sound unlike anything I'd ever heard, and three of the… things that attacked Ms. Diamond in the road shambled from the darkness and dragged us away, far from the limo and into the fields. Mr. Rawat, Kara, and their bodyguard were alive when they were dumped into the center of the clearing. The bodyguard, Dedrick… despite his horrible wounds. All of them were alive, Agent Clack. Very much alive. Dr. Christou too, although I could hardly recognize him beneath the mask of blood he wore. The blood was caked an inch thick and the fresh stuff oozed around the edges."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that. I still don't understand how we missed you out there. The wheat is only four feet tall." Agent Clack sounded more fascinated than sorry.

"I don't know how it was done. But it was. Black magic, worse."

"So, what happened? Exactly."

Lancaster hesitated for a long moment. "Eyes only, agent. My eyes only."

"Now, now, codger. You don't wanna fuck with the man with the shiny laminated picture I.D."

"The others were drained. Drained, Agent Clack."

Agent Clack dropped his cigarette butt on the carpet and ground it to bits under his heel. He lighted another and smoked it, expression obscured by the blue haze. Finally, he said, "Alrighty, then. The investigation is ongoing. You'll talk, sooner or later. I've got time to kill."

"There are unspeakable truths." Lancaster closed his eyes for a long moment. "It pleased them to spare me in the name of a venerable cliché.

Cliché’s contain all truth, of course. The purpose of my survival was to bear witness, to carry the tale. The thrill of spreading terror, of lurking in the night as bogeymen of legend, titillates them. They are beasts, horrid undreamt of marvels.”

“Gotta love those undreamt of marvels.”

“You couldn’t understand. After their masters fed, Blaylock and Mrs. Cook made Christou and the others join bloody hands and dance. The corpses danced. In a circle, jostling like marionettes. And Blaylock and Mrs. Cook laughed and plucked the strings.”

Agent Clack nodded and dragged on his cigarette then rose and regarded Lancaster with a kindly expression. “Sure. You take care. My people will be in touch with your people and all that jazz.”

“Oh, we won’t meet again, Agent Clack. Christou is dead, ending that particular game. Gregor Blaylock and the rest are vanished into the woodwork. I’ve told the story and am thus expendable. Very soon. Very soon I’ll be reclaimed.”

“Don’t worry, we’re watching you. Anybody comes sniffing around, we’ll nab ’em.”

“I suppose I’m comforted.”

“By the way,” Agent Clack said. “Is anyone else staying here with you? When I came in to wait, swore someone was in the bedroom, watching from the door. Thought it was you… Couldn’t find anybody. Maybe they slipped away through the window, eh? Call me paranoid. We spooks are always worried about the baddies getting the drop on us.”

“It wasn’t me,” Lancaster said. He turned and glanced at the bedroom doorway, the dimness within.

“Hah, didn’t really think so. More oddness at the end of an odd day.”

“Well, agent, whatever it was, I hope you don’t see it again. Especially one of these nights when you’re alone.”

Agent Clack continued to gaze at the older man for several beats. He slipped the memory stick into his pocket and walked out. He didn’t bother to close the door. The gap filled with white light that slowly downshifted to black.

He finished his vacation and returned to the States and cashed in his chips at Roache. No hassle, not even an exit interview. Despite the suddenness of Lancaster's departure, some of his colleagues scrambled to throw together an impromptu retirement party. He almost escaped before one of the secretaries lassoed him as he was sneaking out the back door.

He was ushered into a Digital Age conference room with a huge table and comfortable chairs and a bay window overlooking downtown. The room shone in the streaming sunlight, every surface glowed and bloomed. His co-workers bore cheap gifts and there was a white layer cake and a bowl of punch. The dozen or so of them sang *For He's a Jolly Good Fellow* off-key. What dominated Lancaster's mind was the burble and boil of the water cooler, the drone of the inset lights. How the white frosting gleamed like an incisor. He caught his reflection in the shiny brass of a wall plate and beheld himself shrunken, emaciated, a leering devil. He averted his gaze, stared instead into the glare of the lowering sun. After the punch went dry and the songs were sung and the hand-shakes and empty pleasantries done with, he fled without looking back.

No one called, no one rang, and eventually Lancaster grew content in his final isolation. He allowed his apartment lease to lapse and went into the country and rented a room in a chintzy motel on the side of a less-traveled road. He stocked his closet with crates of liquor and cartons of cigarettes, and by day drank more or less continually in the yard of the motel beneath the gloomy shade of a big tree. By night he drank alone in the tavern and listened to an endless loop of rock-a-billy from the jukebox, the mutter and hum of provincial conversation among the locals. Cigarette smoke lay as heavy as that belched from a crematory stack. The bathroom reeked of piss. He always wore one of the seven nicer suits he'd kept from his collection. A suit for each day of the week. He thought of the lacquered black box stashed beneath his flimsy motel bed. His killing jar of the mind. So far he'd resisted the pleasure, the comfort, of handling its contents. Cold turkey was best, he thought.

He waited. Waited, lulled by the buzz of the neon advertisement in the taproom glass. Waited, idly observing barflies—gin-blossom noses, broken teeth, haggard and wasted flesh. A few women patronized the tavern, mostly soft, mostly ruined. Soft bellies, breasts, necks, bad mascara. Soft and sliding. Their soft necks stirred ancient feelings, but these subsided as *he*, in all meaningful ways, subsided.

Inevitably, one of the more vital female denizens joined him at his table in the murkiest corner of the room. They talked of inconsequentialities and danced the verbal dance. Her makeup could've been worse. Despite his weeks of self-imposed silence the old charm came readily. The deepseated switch clicked on and sprang the lock of the cage of the sleeping beast.

Lancaster allowed her to lead him into the cool evening and toward the rear of the building. He pressed her against the wall, empty parking lot at his back, empty fields, empty sky, and he took her, breathed in the tint of her frazzled peroxide-brittle hair, her boozy sweat, listened to the faint chime of her jewelry as he fucked her. She didn't make much noise, seemed to lose interest in him as their coupling progressed. He placed his hand on her throat, thumb lightly slotted between the joints of her windpipe. Her pulse beat, beat. Her face was pale, washed in the buzzing glow of a single security light at the corner of the eaves a moth battened against the mesh and cast raccoon shadows around the woman's eyes, masked her, dehumanized her, which suited his purpose. Except as his grip tightened his stomach rolled over, his insides realigning with the lateral pull of an intensifying gravitational force, as if he'd swallowed a hook and someone were reeling it in, toying with him.

They separated and Lancaster hesitated, slack and spent, pants unzipped. The woman smoothed her skirt, lighted a cigarette. She walked away as he stood hand to mouth, guts straining against their belt of muscle and suet. The pull receded, faded. He shook himself and retreated to the motel, his squalid burrow. The thermostat was damaged, its needle stuck too far to the right, and the room was sauna-hot, dim as a pit. He sat naked but for his briefs.

He picked up the phone on the second ring. Mr. Blaylock spoke through miles and miles of static. "You are a wild, strange fellow, Mr. Lancaster. Leave the world as a perfect mystery. Confound your watchdogs, your

friends, the lovers who never knew you. All that's left is to disappear." Mr. Blaylock broke the connection.

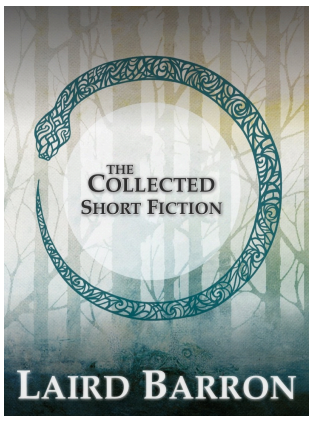
The muted television drifted in and out of focus. Ice cracked as it melted in Lancaster's glass. The cherry glow of his cigarette flickered against the ceiling like firelight upon the ceiling of a cave. His cigarette slipped from his fingers and burned yet another hole in the carpet. He slept.

A single knock woke him. He waited for another until it became apparent none was forthcoming. He retrieved the box and placed it on the table, arrayed each item with a final reverent caress. Photographs, newspaper clippings, an earring, a charm bracelet. Something for those investigators to marvel at, to be amazed and horrified by what they'd never known regarding his secret nature. Then he went to door, passed through and stood on the concrete steps. The tavern across the way was closed and black and the night's own blackness was interrupted by a scatter of stars, a veil of muddy light streaming from the manager's office.

The universe dilated within him, above him. Something like joy stirred in Lancaster's being, a sublime ecstasy born of terror. His heart felt as if it might burst, might leap from his chest. His cheeks were wet. Drops of blood glittered on his bare arms, the backs of his hands, his thighs, his feet. Black as the blackest pearls come undone from a string, the droplets lifted from him, drifted from him like a slow motion comet tail, and floated toward the road, the fields. For the first time in an age he heard nothing but the night sounds of crickets, his own breath. His skull was quiet.

First at a trot, then an ungainly lope, Lancaster followed his blood into the great, hungry darkness.

The Carrion Gods In Their Heaven



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The leaves were turning.

Lorna fueled the car at a mom and pop gas station in the town of Poger Rock, population 190. Poger Rock comprised a forgotten, moribund collection of buildings tucked into the base of a wooded valley a stone's throw south of Olympia. The station's marquee was badly peeled and she couldn't decipher its title. A tavern called Mooney's occupied a gravel island half a block down and across the two lane street from the post office and the grange. Next to a dumpster, a pair of mongrel dogs were locked in coitus, patiently facing opposite directions, Dr. Doolittle's Pushmi-pullyu for the twenty-first century. Other than vacant lots overrun by bushes and alder trees, and a lone antiquated traffic light at the intersection that led out of town, either toward Olympia, or deeper into cow country, there wasn't much else to look at. She hobbled in to pay and ended up grabbing a few extra supplies—canned peaches and fruit cocktail, as there wasn't any refrigeration at the cabin. She snagged three bottles of bourbon gathering dust on a low shelf.

The clerk noticed her folding crutch, and the soft cast on her left leg. She declined his offer to carry her bags. After she loaded the Subaru, she ventured into the tavern and ordered a couple rounds of tequila. The tavern was dim and smoky and possessed a frontier vibe with antique flintlocks over the bar, and stuffed and mounted deer heads staring from the walls. A great black wolf snarled atop a dais near the entrance. The bartender watched her drain the shots raw. He poured her another on the house and said, "You're staying at the Haugstad place, eh?"

She hesitated, the glass partially raised, then set the drink on the counter and limped away without answering. She assayed the long, treacherous drive up to the cabin, chewing over the man's question, the morbid implication of his smirk. She got the drift. Horror movies and pulp novels made the conversational gambit infamous; life imitating art. Was she staying at the Haugstad place indeed. Like hell she'd take *that* bait. The townsfolk were strangers to her and she wondered how the bartender knew where she lived. Obviously, the hills had eyes.

Two weeks prior, Lorna had fled into the wilderness to an old hunting cabin with her lover Miranda. Miranda was the reason she'd discovered the courage to leave her husband Bruce, the reason he grabbed a fistful of Lorna's hair and threw her down a flight of concrete stairs in the parking garage of SeaTac airport. That was the second time Lorna had tried to escape with their daughter Orillia. Sweet Orillia, eleven years old next month, was safe in Florida with relatives. Lorna missed her daughter, but slept better knowing she was far from Bruce's reach. He wasn't interested in going after the child; at least not as his first order of business.

Bruce was a vengeful man, and Lorna feared him the way she might fear a hurricane, a volcano, a flood. His rages overwhelmed and obliterated his impulse control. Bruce was a force of nature, all right, and capable of far worse than breaking her leg. He owned a gun and a collection of knives, had done time years ago for stabbing somebody during a fight over a gambling debt. He often got drunk and sat in his easy chair, cleaning his pistol or sharpening a large cruel-looking blade he called an Arkansas Toothpick.

So, it came to this: Lorna and Miranda shacked up in the mountains while Lorna's estranged husband, free on bail, awaited trial back in Seattle. Money wasn't a problem—Bruce made plenty as a manager at a lumber company, and Lorna helped herself to a healthy portion of it when she headed for the hills.

Both women were loners by necessity or device, as the case might be, who'd met at a cocktail party thrown by one of Bruce's colleagues and clicked on contact. Lorna hadn't worked since her stint as a movie theater clerk during college—Bruce insisted she stay home and raise Orillia, and when Orillia grew older, he dropped his pretenses and punched Lorna in the

jaw after she pressed the subject of getting a job, beginning a career. She'd dreamed of going to grad school for a degree in social work.

Miranda was a semi-retired artist; acclaimed in certain quarters and much in demand for her wax sculptures. She cheerfully set up a mini studio in the spare bedroom, strictly to keep her hand in. Photography was her passion of late and she'd brought along several complicated and expensive cameras. She was also the widow of a once famous sculptor. Between her work and her husband's royalties, she wasn't exactly rich, but not exactly poor either. They'd survive a couple of months "roughing it." Miranda suggested they consider it a vacation, an advance celebration of "Brucifer's" (her pet name for Lorna's soon to be ex) impending stint as a guest of King County Jail.

She'd secured the cabin through a labyrinthine network of connections. Miranda's second (or was it a third?) cousin gave them a ring of keys and a map to find the property. It sat in the mountains, ten miles from civilization amid high timber and a tangle of abandoned logging roads. The driveway was cut into a steep hillside; a hundred-yard-long dirt track hidden by masses of brush and trees. The perfect bolt-hole.

Bruce wouldn't find them here in the catbird's seat overlooking nowhere.

Lorna arrived home a few minutes before nightfall. Miranda came to the porch and waved. She was tall; her hair long and burnished auburn, her skin dusky and unblemished. Lorna thought her beautiful; lush and ripe, vaguely Rubenesque. A contrast to Lorna's own paleness, her angular, sinewy build. She thought it amusing that their personalities reflected their physiognomies—Miranda tended to be placid and yielding and sweetly melancholy, while Lorna was all sharp edges.

Miranda helped bring in the groceries—she'd volunteered to drive into town and fetch them herself, but Lorna refused and the reason why went unspoken, although it loomed large. A lot more than her leg needed healing. Bruce had done the shopping, paid the bills, made every decision for thirteen, tortuous years. Not all at once, but gradually, until he crushed her, smothered her, with his so-called love. That was over. A little more pain and

suffering in the service of emancipation—figuratively and literally—following a lost decade seemed appropriate.

The Haugstad Cabin was practically a fossil and possessed of a dark history that Miranda hinted at, but coyly refused to disclose. It was in solid repair for a building constructed in the 1920s; on the cozy side, even: thick, slab walls and a mossy shake roof. Two bedrooms, a pantry, a loft, a cramped toilet and bath, and a living room with a kitchenette tucked in the corner. The cellar's trapdoor was concealed inside the pantry. She had no intention of going down there. She hated spiders and all the other creepy-crawlies sure to infest that wet and lightless space. Nor did she like the tattered bearskin rug before the fireplace, nor the oil painting of a hunter in buckskins stalking along a ridge beneath a twilit sky, nor a smaller portrait of a stag with jagged horns in menacing silhouette atop a cliff, also at sunset. Lorna detested the idea of hunting, preferred not to ponder where the chicken in chicken soup came from, much less the fate of cattle. These artifacts of minds and philosophies so divergent from her own were disquieting.

There were a few modern renovations—a portable generator provided electricity to power the plumbing and lights. No phone, however. Not that it mattered as her cell reception was passable despite the rugged terrain. The elevation and eastern exposure also enabled the transistor radio to capture a decent signal.

Miranda raised an eyebrow when she came across the bottles of Old Crow. She stuck them in a cabinet without comment. They made a simple pasta together with peaches on the side and a glass or three of wine for dessert. Later, they relaxed near the fire. Conversation lapsed into a comfortable silence until Lorna chuckled upon recalling the bartender's portentous question, which seemed inane rather than sinister now that she was half-drunk and drowsing in her lover's arms. Miranda asked what was so funny and Lorna told her about the tavern incident.

"Man alive, I found something weird today," Miranda said. She'd stiffened when Lorna described shooting tequila. Lorna's drinking was a bone of contention. She'd hit the bottle when Orillia went into first grade, leaving her alone at the house for the majority of too many lonely days. At first it'd been innocent enough: a nip or two of cooking sherry, the occasional glass

of wine during the soaps, then the occasional bottle of wine, then the occasional bottle of Maker's Mark or Johnny Walker, and finally, the bottle was open and in her hand five minutes after Orillia skipped to the bus and the cork didn't go back in until five minutes before her little girl came home. Since she and Miranda became an item, she'd striven to restrict her boozing to social occasions, dinner, and the like. But sweet Jesus, fuck. At least she hadn't broken down and started smoking again.

"Where'd you go?" Lorna said.

"That trail behind the woodshed. I wanted some photographs. Being cooped up in here is driving me a teensy bit bonkers."

"So, how weird was it?"

"Maybe weird isn't quite the word. Gross. Gross is more accurate."

"You're killing me."

"That trail goes a long way. I think deer use it as a path because it's really narrow but well-beaten. We should hike to the end one of these days, see how far it goes. I'm curious where it ends."

"Trails don't end; they just peter out. We'll get lost and spend the winter gnawing bark like the Donners."

"You're so morbid!" Miranda laughed and kissed Lorna's ear. She described crossing a small clearing about a quarter mile along the trail. At the far end was a stand of Douglas Fir and she didn't notice the tree house until she stopped to snap a few pictures. The tree house was probably as old as the cabin; its wooden planks were bone yellow where they peeked through moss and branches. The platform perched about fifteen feet off the ground, and a ladder was nailed to the backside of tree…

"You didn't climb the tree," Lorna said.

Miranda flexed her scraped and bruised knuckles. "Yes, I climbed that tree, all right." The ladder was very precarious and the platform itself so rotted, sections of it had fallen away. Apparently, for no stronger reason than boredom, she risked life and limb to clamber atop the platform and investigate.

"It's not a tree house," Lorna said. "You found a hunter's blind. The hunter sits on the platform, camouflaged by the branches. Eventually, some poor

hapless critter comes by, and blammo! Sadly, I've learned a lot from Bruce's favorite cable television shows. What in the heck compelled you to scamper around in a deathtrap in the middle of the woods? You could've gotten yourself in a real fix."

"That occurred to me. My foot went through in one spot and I almost crapped my pants. If I got stuck I could scream all day and nobody would hear me. The danger was worth it, though."

"Well, what did you find? Some moonshine in mason jars? D.B. Cooper's skeleton?"

"Time for the reveal!" Miranda extricated herself from Lorna and went and opened the door, letting in a rush of cold night air. She returned with what appeared to be a bundle of filthy rags and proceeded to unroll them.

Lorna realized her girlfriend was presenting an animal hide. The fur had been sewn into a crude cape or cloak; beaten and weathered from great age, and shriveled along the hem. The head was that of some indeterminate predator—possibly a wolf or coyote. Whatever the species, the creature was a prize specimen. Despite the cloak's deteriorated condition, she could imagine it draped across the broad shoulders of a Viking berserker or an Indian warrior. She said, "You realize that you just introduced several colonies of fleas, ticks, and lice into our habitat with that wretched thing."

"Way ahead of you, baby. I sprayed it with bleach. Cooties were crawling all over. Isn't it neat?"

"It's horrifying," Lorna said. Yet, she couldn't look away as Miranda held it at arm's length so the pelt gleamed dully in the firelight. What was it? Who'd worn it and why? Was it a garment to provide mere warmth, or to blend with the surroundings? The painting of the hunter was obscured by shadows, but she thought of the man in buckskin sneaking along, looking for something to kill, a throat to slice. Her hand went to her throat.

"This was hanging from a peg. I'm kinda surprised it's not completely ruined, what with the elements. Funky, huh? A Daniel Boone era accessory."

"Gives me the creeps."

"The creeps? It's just a fur."

“I don’t dig fur. Fur is dead. Man.”

“You’re a riot. I wonder if it’s worth money.”

“I really doubt that. Who cares? It’s not ours.”

“Finders keepers,” Miranda said. She held the cloak against her bosom as if she were measuring a dress. “Rowr! I’m a wild-woman. Better watch yourself tonight!” She’d drunk enough wine to be in the mood for theater. “Scandinavian legends say to wear the skin of beast is to become the beast. Haugstad fled to America in 1910, cast out from his community. There was a series of unexplained murders back in the homeland, and other unsavory deeds, all of which pointed to his doorstep. People in his village swore he kept a bundle of hides in a storehouse, that he donned them and became something other than a man, that it was he who tore apart a family’s cattle, that it was he who slaughtered a couple of boys hunting rabbits in the field, that it was he who desecrated graves and ate of the flesh of the dead during lean times. So, he left just ahead of a pitchfork-wielding mob. He built this cabin and lived a hermit’s life. Alas, his dark past followed. Some of the locals in Poger Rock got wind of the old scandals. One of the town drunks claimed he saw the trapper turn into a wolf and nobody laughed as hard as one might expect. Haugstad got blamed whenever a cow disappeared, when the milk went sour, you name it. Then, over the course of ten years or so a long string of loggers and ranchers vanished. The natives grew restless and it was the scene in Norway all over again.”

“What happened to him?”

“He wandered into the mountains one winter and never returned. Distant kin took over this place, lived here off and on the last thirty or forty years. Folks still remember, though.” Miranda made an exaggerated face and waggled her fingers. “Booga-booga!”

Lorna smiled, but she was repulsed by the hide, and unsettled by Miranda’s flushed cheeks, her loopy grin. Her lover’s playfulness wasn’t amusing her as it might’ve on another night. She said, “Toss that wretched skin outside, would you? Let’s hit the rack. I’m exhausted.”

“Exhausted, eh? Now is my chance to take full advantage of you.” Miranda winked as she stroked the hide. Instead of heading for the front door she took her prize to the spare bedroom and left it there. She came back and

embraced Lorna. Her eyes were too bright. The wine was strong on her breath. “Told you it was cool. God knows what else we’ll find if we look sharp.”

They made fierce love. Miranda was much more aggressive than her custom. The pain in Lorna’s knee built from a small flame to a white blaze of agony and her orgasm only registered as spasms in her thighs and shortness of breath, pleasure eclipsed entirely by suffering. Miranda didn’t notice the tears on Lorna’s cheeks, the frantic nature of her moans. When it ended, she kissed Lorna on the mouth, tasting of musk and salt, and something indefinably bitter. She collapsed and was asleep within seconds.

Lorna lay propped by pillows, her hand tangled in Miranda’s hair. The faint yellow shine of a three-quarter moon peeked over the ridgeline across the valley and beamed through the window at the foot of the bed. She could tell it was cold because their breaths misted the glass. A wolf howled and she flinched, the cry arousing a flutter of primordial dread in her breast. She waited until Miranda’s breathing steadied, then crept away. She put on Miranda’s robe and grabbed a bottle of Old Crow and a glass and poured herself a dose and sipped it before the main window in the living room.

Thin, fast moving clouds occasionally crossed the face of the moon and its light pulsed and shadows reached like claws across the silvery landscape of rocky hillocks and canyons, and stands of firs and pine. The stars burned a finger-width above the crowns of the adjacent peaks. The land fell away into deeper shadow, a rift of darkness uninterrupted by a solitary flicker of manmade light. She and Miranda weren’t welcome; the cabin and its former inhabitants hadn’t been either, despite persisting like ticks bored into the flank of a dog. The immensity of the void intimidated her, and for a moment she almost missed Bruce and the comparative safety of her suburban home, the gilded cage, even the bondage. She blinked, angry at this lapse into the bad old way of thinking, and drank the whiskey. “I’m not a damned whipped dog.” She didn’t bother pouring, but had another pull directly from the bottle.

The wolf howled again and another answered. The beasts sounded close and she wondered if they were circling the cabin, wondered if they smelled

her and Miranda, or whether their night vision was so acute they could see her in the window—she half in the bag, a bottle dangling from her hand, favoring her left leg, weak and cut from the herd. She considered the cautionary tale of Sven Haugstad and drank some more. Her head spun. She waited for another howl, determined to answer with her own.

Miranda's arms encircled her. She cupped Lorna's breasts and licked her earlobe, nibbled her neck. Lorna cried out and grabbed Miranda's wrist before she registered who it was, and relaxed. "Holy crap, you almost gave me a heart attack!" The floor creaked horribly, they'd even played a game of chopsticks by rhythmically pressing alternating sections with their shoes, but she hadn't heard her lover cross the room. Not a whisper.

Something metallic snicked and an orange flame reflected in the window and sweet, sharp smoke filled Lorna's nostrils. Miranda gently pressed a cigarette to Lorna's lips. Miranda said, "I needed this earlier, except I was too damned lazy to leave the covers. Better late than never."

"Gawd, you read my mind." Lorna took a drag, then exhaled contentedly. The nicotine mixed with the alcohol did its magic. Her fear of the night land and its creatures receded. "I guess I can forgive you for sneaking up on me since you've offered me the peace pipe. Ahhh, I've fallen off the wagon. You're evil. Did you hear the wolves?"

"Those aren't wolves," Miranda said. She reclaimed the cigarette. She inhaled and the cigarette's cherry floated in the window as her face floated in the window, a blur over Lorna's shoulder. "Those are coyotes."

"No shit?"

"Is that why you're so jumpy? You thought the *wolves* were gonna get you?"

"I'm not jumpy. Well, sheesh—an almost full moon, wolves howling on the moor, er, in the woods. Gotta admit it's all kinda spooky."

"Not wolves. Coyotes. Come to bed… It's chilly."

"Right. Coyotes," Lorna said. "I'm embarrassed. That's like peeing myself over dingoes or raccoons."

Snug under a pile of blankets, Lorna was drifting off to sleep when Miranda said in a dreamy voice, "Actually, coyotes are much scarier than

wolves. Sneaky, sneaky little suckers. Eat you up. Lick the blood all up."

"What?" Lorna said. Miranda didn't answer. She snored.

One morning, a woman who resembled Vivian Leigh at the flowering of her glory knocked on the door. She wore a green jacket and a green and yellow kerchief and yellow sunglasses. Her purse was shiny red plastic with a red plastic strap. Her gloves were white. Her skirt was black and her shoes were also black. She smiled when Lorna opened the door and her lipstick was blood red like the leaves. "Oh, I'm very sorry to disturb you, Ma'am. I seem to be a trifle lost." The woman introduced herself as Beth. She'd gone for a drive in the hills, searching for the Muskrat Creek Campground. "Apparently, I zigged when I should've zagged," she said, and laughed a laugh worthy of the stage. "Speaking of zigzags, do you mind?" She opened an enamel case and extracted a cigarette and inserted it into a silver holder and lighted up with a stick match. It was all very mesmerizing.

Lorna had nearly panicked upon hearing the knock, convinced Bruce had tracked her down. She recovered and invited the woman inside and gave her a cup of coffee. Miranda had gone on her morning walk, which left Lorna with the task of entertaining the stranger while deflecting any awkward questions. She unpacked the road map from her Subaru and spread it across the table. She used a pencil to mark the campgrounds, which were twenty-odd miles from the cabin. Beth had wandered far off course, indeed.

"Thank goodness I came across you. These roads go on forever." Beth sipped her coffee and puffed on her fancy cigarette. She slipped her sunglasses into her purse and glanced around the cabin. Her gaze traveled slowly, weighing everything it crossed. "You are certainly off the beaten path."

"We're private people," Lorna said. "Where's your car?"

Beth gestured toward the road. "Parked around the corner. I didn't know if I could turn around in here, so I walked. Silly me, I broke a heel." She raised her calf to show that indeed yes, the heel of her left pump was wobbly.

"Are you alone?"

“Yes. I was supposed to meet friends at the campgrounds, but I can’t reach anybody. No bars. I’m rather cross with them and their directions.”

Lorna blinked, taking a moment to realize the woman meant she couldn’t get proper phone reception. “Mine works fine. I’d be happy to let you place a call—”

“Thanks anyway, sweetie.” Beth had sketched directions inside a notebook. “It’ll be a cinch now that I’ve got my bearings.” She finished her coffee, said thanks and goodbye, waving jauntily as she picked her way down the rutted lane.

Lorna started the generator to get hot water for a quick shower. After the shower she made toast and more coffee and sat at the table relaxing with a nice paperback romance, one of several she’d had the foresight to bring along. Out the window, she glimpsed movement among the trees, a low and heavy shape that she recognized as a large dog—no, not a dog, a wolf. The animal almost blended with the rotten leaves and wet brush, and it nosed the earth, moving disjointedly, as if crippled. When it reared on its hind legs, Lorna gasped. Miranda pulled back the cowl of the hide cloak, and leaned against a tree. Her expression was strange; she did not quite appear to be herself. She shuddered in the manner of a person emerging from a trance and walked to where the driveway curved and left three paper plates pressed into the bank. She spaced the plates about three feet apart. Each bore a bull’s-eye drawn in magic marker.

Miranda came inside. She’d removed the hide. Her hair was messy and tangled with twigs and leaves. “Who was here?” Her voice rasped like she’d been shouting.

“Some woman looking for a campground.” Lorna recounted the brief visit, too unnerved to mention what she’d witnessed. Her heart raced and she was overcome by dizziness that turned the floor to a trampoline. Miranda didn’t say anything. She opened a duffel bag and brandished a revolver. She examined the pistol, snapping its cylinder open, then shut. Lorna wasn’t particularly conversant with guns, but she’d watched Bruce enough to know this one was loaded. “I thought we were going to discuss it before you bought one,” she said.

Miranda rattled a small box of shells and slipped them into the pocket of her vest. “I didn’t buy one. A friend gave it to me when I told him about Brucifer. An ex cop. This sucker doesn’t have a serial number.”

“There’s no reason to be upset. She was lost. That’s all.”

“Of course she was.”

Lorna watched her put the gun in her other pocket. “What’s wrong?”

“You’ve only paid cash, right? No debit card, no credit card?”

“You mean in town?”

“I mean anywhere. Like we agreed. No credit cards.”

“Tell me what’s wrong. She was lost. People get lost. It’s not unheard of, you know. And it doesn’t matter. I didn’t tell her my name. I didn’t tell her anything. She was lost. What was I supposed to do? Not answer the door? Maybe stick that gun in her face and demand some ID?”

“The campgrounds are closed,” Miranda said. “I was outside the door while she gave you her shuck and jive. She came in a panel van. A guy with a beard and sunglasses was driving. Didn’t get a good look at him.”

Lorna covered her face. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

Miranda’s boots made loud clomping sounds as she walked to the door. She hesitated for a few moments, then said, “It’s okay. You handled her fine. Bruce has got entirely too much money.”

Lorna nodded and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “We’ll see how much money he has after my lawyer gets through with him.”

Miranda smiled. It was thin and pained, but a smile. She shut the door behind her. Lorna curled into a ball on the bed. The revolver fired, its report muffled by the thick walls of the cabin. She imagined the black holes in the white paper. She imagined black holes drilling through Bruce’s white face. Pop, pop, pop.

Miranda brought Lorna to a stand of trees on the edge of a clearing and showed her the hunting blind. The bloody sun fell into the earth and the

only slightly less bloody moon swung, like a pendulum, to replace it in the lower black of the sky. “That is one big bad yellow moon,” Miranda said.

“It’s beautiful,” Lorna said. “Like an iceberg sliding through space.” She thought the fullness of the moon, its astral radiance, presaged some kind of cosmic shift. Her blood sang and the hairs on her arms prickled. It was too dark to see the platform in the branches, but she felt it there, heard its timbers squeak in the breeze.

“Been having strange dreams,” Miranda said. “Most of them are blurry. Last one I remember was about the people who used to live around here, a long time ago. They weren’t gentle folks, that’s for sure.”

“Well, of course not,” Lorna said. “They stuck a deer head over the fireplace and skinned poor hapless woodland critters and hung them in the trees.”

“Yeah,” Miranda said. She lighted a cigarette. “Want one?”

“No.”

Miranda smoked most of her cigarette before she spoke again. “In the latest dream it was winter, frost thick on the windows. I sat on the bearskin rug. Late at night, a big fire crackling away, and an old man, I mean old as dirt, was kicked back in a rocker, talking to me, telling me stuff. I couldn’t see his face because he sat in the shadows. He wore old-timey clothes and a fur jacket, and a hat made out of an animal head. Coyote or wolf. He explained how to set a snare for rabbits, how to skin a deer. The dream changed and jumped around, like dreams do, and we were kneeling on the floor by the carcass of, I dunno what. A possum, I think. The meat was green and soft; it had been dead a while. The old man told me a survivor eats what’s around. Then he stuck his face into that mess of stinking meat and took a bite.”

“That’s a message,” Lorna said. “The great universal consciousness is trying to tell you, us, to adapt. Adapt or die.”

“Or it could be a dream, full stop.”

“Is that what you think?”

“I think it’s time to get our minds right. Face the inevitable.”

“The inevitable?”

“We’re never going to get away,” Miranda said.

“Well, that’s a hell of an attitude.”

“I saw that van again. Parked in that gravel pit just down the road. They’re watching us, Lorna.”

“Oh, Jesus.”

“Don’t worry about those bastards. They’ll be dealt with.”

“Dealt with? Dealt with how?” Lorna’s mind flashed to the revolver. The notion of Miranda shooting anyone in cold blood was ridiculous. Yet, here in the dark beyond the reach of rule or reason, such far-fetched notions bore weight. “Don’t get any crazy ideas.”

“I mean, don’t worry yourself sick over the help. Nah, the bigger problem is your husband. How much time is Bruce going to get? A few months? A year? Talk about your lawyer. *Bruce’s* lawyer is slick. He might not get anything. Community service, a stern admonition from the judge to go forth and sin no more.”

Lorna winced. Stress caused her leg to throb. The cigarette smoke drove her mad with desire. She stifled a sharp response and regarded the moon instead. Her frustration dissolved in the presence of cold, implacable majesty. She said, “I know. It’s the way of the world. People like Bruce always win.” She’d called Orillia earlier that evening, asked her how things were going at the new school. Orillia didn’t want to talk about school; she wanted to know when she could see Daddy again, worried that he was lonely. Lorna had tried to keep emotion from her voice when she answered that Mom and Dad were working through some issues and everything would soon be sorted. Bruce was careful to not hit Lorna in front of their daughter, and though Orillia witnessed the bruises and the breaks, the sobbing aftermath, she seemed to disassociate these from her father’s actions.

“There are other ways to win.” Miranda was a black shadow against the dead silver grass. “Like you said—adapt or die. The old man showed me. In the beginning you need a prop, but it gets easier when you realize it’s all in your head.”

It was a long walk back through the woods. Dry leaves crunched beneath their shoes. They locked themselves into the cabin and got ready for bed.

Lorna's dreams had been strange as well, but she'd kept quiet. She wasn't open about such things, not even with Miranda. The ghost of old man Haugstad didn't speak to Lorna; instead, her dreams transported her to the barren slopes above the tree line of the valley. The moon fumed and boiled. She was a passenger in another's body, a body that seethed with profound vitality. The moon's yellow glow stirred her blood and she raced down the slope and into the trees. She smelled the land, tasted it on her lolling tongue, drawing in the scent of every green deer spoor, every droplet of coyote musk, every spackling of piss on rock or shrub. She smelled fresh blood and meat-blacked bone. There were many, many bones scattered across the mountainside. Generational heaps of them—ribs, thighs, horns, skulls. These graveyards were secret places, scattered for miles across deep, hidden caches and among the high rocks.

Lorna stroked Miranda's belly. Miranda's excess had melted away in recent days. She was lean from day-long hikes and skipped meals and her scent was different, almost gamey, her hair lank and coarse. She was restless and she whined in her sleep. She bit too hard when they made love.

Miranda took Lorna's hand and said, "What is it?"

"I'm afraid you're going to leave."

"Oh, where the fuck is this coming from?"

"Something's different. Something's changed. You weren't honest about where you found the coat. The skin."

Miranda chuckled without humor. "Let sleeping dogs lie."

"I'm not in the mood for cute," Lorna said.

"My sweet one. I left out the part that might… frighten you. You're skittish enough."

"I'm also not in the mood for Twenty Questions. What did you mean earlier—the old man showed you?"

"Old man Haugstad told me where to look, what I needed to do."

"In a dream."

"Not in a dream. The day I discovered the blind, a coyote skulked out of the bushes and led me along the path. It was the size of a mastiff, blizzard white on the muzzle and crisscrossed with scars."

“I don’t understand,” Lorna said, but was afraid she might.

“We’re here for a reason. Can’t you feel the power all around us? After I lost Jack, after I finally accepted he was gone, I pretty much decided to off myself. If I hadn’t met you at that party I probably would’ve died within a few days. I’d picked out the pills, the clothes I intended to wear, knew exactly where it was going to happen. When was the only question.”

Lorna began to cry.

“I won’t leave you. But it’s possible you might decide not to come with me.” Miranda rolled to her opposite side and said nothing more. Lorna slowly drifted to sleep. She woke later while it was still dark. Miranda’s side of the bed was a cold blank space. Her clothes were still piled on the floor. In a moment of sublimely morbid intuition, Lorna clicked on a flashlight and checked the spare bedroom where Miranda had taken to hanging the fur cloak from a hook on the door. Of course the cloak was missing.

She gathered her robe tightly, sparing a moment to reflect upon her resemblance to the doomed heroines on any number of lurid gothic horror novel covers and went outdoors into the freezing night. Her teeth chattered and her fear became indistinguishable from the chill. She poked around the cabin, occasionally calling her lover’s name, although in a soft tone, afraid to attract the attention of the wolves, the coyotes, or whatever else might roam the forest at night.

Eventually she approached the woodshed and saw the door was cracked open by several inches. She stepped inside. Miranda crouched on the dirt floor. The flashlight was weak and its flickering cone only hinted and suggested. The pelt covered Miranda, concealed her so she was scarcely more than a lump. She whined and shuddered and took notice of the pallid light, and as she stirred, Lorna was convinced that the pelt was not a loose cloak, not an ill-fitted garment, but something else entirely for the manner in which it flexed with each twitch and shiver of Miranda’s musculature.

The flashlight glass cracked and imploded. The shed lay in utter darkness except for a thin sliver of moonlight that burned yellow in Miranda’s eyes. Lorna’s mouth was dry. She said, “Sweetheart?”

Miranda said in a voice rusty and drugged, “Why don’t you… go on to bed. I’ll be along. I’ll come see you real soon.” She stood, a ponderous yet lithe, uncoiling motion, and her head scraped the low ceiling.

Lorna got out fast and stumbled toward the cabin. She didn’t look over her shoulder even though she felt hot breath on the back of her neck.

They didn’t speak of the incident. For a couple of days they hardly spoke at all. Miranda drifted in and out of the cabin like a ghost and Lorna dreaded to ask where she went in the dead of night, why she wore the hide and nothing else. Evening temperatures dipped below freezing, yet Miranda didn’t appear to suffer, on the contrary, she thrived. She hadn’t eaten a bite from their store of canned goods, hadn’t taken a meal all week. Lorna lay awake staring at the ceiling as the autumn rains rattled the windows.

On the fifth or sixth afternoon, she sat alone at the kitchen table downing the last of the Old Crow. The previous evening she’d experienced two visceral and disturbing dreams. In the first she was serving drinks at a barbeque. There were dozens of guests. Bruce flipped burgers and hob-nobbed with his office chums. Orillia darted through the crowd with a water pistol, zapping hapless adults before dashing away. The mystery woman Beth, and a bearded man in a track suit she introduced as her husband, came over and told her what a lovely party, what a lovely house, what a lovely family, and Lorna handed them drinks and smiled a big dumb smile as Miranda stood to the side and winked, nodding toward a panel van parked nearby on the grass. The van rocked and a coyote emerged from beneath the vehicle, growling and slobbering and snapping at the air. Grease slicked the animal’s fur black, made its yellow eyes bright as flames.

A moment later, Lorna was in the woods and chasing the bearded man from the party. His track suit flapped in shreds, stained with blood and dirt. The man tripped and fell over a cliff. He crashed in a sprawl of broken limbs, his mouth full of shattered teeth and black gore. He raised a mutilated hand toward her in supplication. She bounded down and mounted him, licked the blood from him, then chewed off his face. She’d awakened with a cry, bile in her throat.

Lorna set aside the empty bottle. She put on her coat and got the revolver from the dresser where Miranda had stashed it for safekeeping. Lorna hadn't fired the gun despite Miranda's offer to practice. However, she'd seen her lover go through the routine—cock the hammer, pull the trigger, click, no real trick. She didn't need the gun, wouldn't use the gun, but somehow its weight in her pocket felt good. She walked down the driveway, moving gingerly to protect her bum knee, then followed the road to the gravel pit where the van was allegedly parked. The rain slackened to drizzle. Patches of mist swirled in the hollows and the canyons and crept along fern beds at the edges of the road. The valley lay hushed, a brooding giant.

The gravel pit was empty. A handful of charred wood and some squashed beer cans confirmed someone had definitely camped there in the not so distant past. She breathed heavily, partially from the incessant throb in her knee, partially from relief. What the hell would she have done if the assholes her husband sent were on the spot roasting wienies? Did she really think people like that would evaporate upon being subjected to harsh language? Did she really have the backbone to flash the gun and send them packing John Wayne style?

She thought the first muffled cry was the screech of a bird, but the second shout got her attention. Her heart was pounding when she finally located the source about a hundred yards farther along the road. Tire tracks veered from the narrow lane toward a forty foot drop into a gulch of trees and boulders. The van had landed on its side. The rear doors were sprung, the glass busted. She wouldn't have noticed it all the way down there if not for the woman crying for help. Her voice sounded weak. But that made sense—Beth had been trapped in the wreck for several days, hadn't she? One snip of the brake line and on these hills it'd be all over but the crying. Miranda surely didn't fuck around, did she? Lorna bit the palm of her hand to stifle a scream.

"Hey," Miranda said. She'd come along as stealthily as the mist and lurked a few paces away near a thicket of brambles. She wore the mangy cloak with the predator's skull covering her own, rendering her features inscrutable. Her feet were bare. She was naked beneath the pelt, her lovely flesh streaked with dirt and blood. Her mouth was stained wine-dark.

“Sorry, honeybunch. I really thought they’d have given up the ghost by now. Alas, alack. Don’t worry. It won’t be long. The birds are here.”

Crows hopped among the limbs and drifted in looping patterns above the ruined van. They squawked and squabbled. The woman yelled something unintelligible. She wailed and fell silent. Lorna’s lip trembled and her nose ran with snot. She swept her arm to indicate their surroundings. “Why did you bring me here?”

Miranda tilted her misshapen head and smiled a sad, cruel smile. “I want to save you, baby. You’re weak.”

Lorna stared into the gulch. The mist thickened and began to fill in the cracks and crevices and covered the van and its occupants. There was no way she could navigate the steep bank, not with her injury. Her cell was at the cabin on the table. She could almost hear the clockwork gears of the universe clicking into alignment, a great dark spotlight shifting across the cosmic stage to center upon her at this moment in time. She said, “I don’t know how to do what you’ve done. To change. Unless that hide is built for two.”

“Don’t worry, baby.” Miranda took her hand and led her back to the cabin. and tenderly undressed her. She smiled faintly when she retrieved the revolver and set it on the table. She kissed Lorna and her breath was hot and foul. Then she stepped back and began to pull the hide away from her body and as it lifted so did the underlying skin, peeling like a scab. Blood poured down Miranda’s chest and belly and pattered on the floorboards. The muscles of her cheeks and jaw bunched and she hissed, eyes rolling, and then it was done and the dripping bundle was free of her red-slicked flesh. Lorna was paralyzed with horror and awe, but finally stirred and tried to resist what her lover proffered. Miranda cuffed her temple, stunning her. She said, “Hold still, baby. You’re gonna thank me,” and draped the cloak across Lorna’s shoulders and pulled the skullcap of the beast over Lorna’s eyes.

“You came here for this?” Lorna said as the slimy and overheated pelt cupped her and enclosed her. The room went in and out of focus.

“No, babe. I just followed the trail and here we are. And it’s good. You’ll see how good it is, how it changes everything. We’ve been living in a cage,

but that’s over now.”

“My god, I loved you.” Lorna blinked the blood from her eyes. She glanced over and saw the revolver on the table, blunt and deadly and glowing with the dwindling light. She grabbed the weapon without thought and pressed it under Miranda’s chin and thumbed the hammer just as she’d seen it done. Her entire body shook. “You thought I’d just leave my daughter behind and slink off to Never-Never Land without a word? Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“Give it a minute,” Miranda said. The fingers of her left hand stroked the pelt. “One minute. Let it work its magic. You’ll see everything in a whole new way. Come on, sweetie.” She reached for the revolver and it barked and twisted in Lorna’s hands.

Lorna didn’t weep. Her insides were stone. She dropped the gun and swayed in place, not focusing on anything. The light began to fade. She made her way outside and sat on the porch. She could smell everything and strange thoughts rushed through her mind.

There was a moment between twilight and darkness when she almost managed to tear free of the hide and begin making the calls that would return her to the world, her daughter, the apocalyptic showdown with the man who’d oppressed her for too long. The moment passed, was usurped by an older and much more powerful impulse. Her thoughts turned to the woods, the hills, a universe of dark, sweet scent. The hunt.

Two weeks later, a hiker spotted a murder of crows in a raucous celebration as they roosted around the wrecked van. He called emergency services. Men and dogs and choppers swarmed the mountainside. The case made all of the papers and ran on the local networks for days. Investigators found two corpses—an adult male and an adult female—in the van. The cause of death was blunt force trauma and prolonged exposure to the elements. Further examination revealed that the brake lines of the van were sawed through, indicative of homicide. The homicide theory was supported by the discovery of a deceased adult female on the floor of a nearby cabin. She’d died of a single bullet wound to the head. A fourth individual who’d also

lived on the premises remained missing and was later presumed dead. Tremendous scrutiny was directed at the missing woman's estranged husband. He professed his innocence throughout the subsequent trial. That he'd hired the deceased couple to spy on his wife didn't help his case.

Years later, a homicide detective wrote a bestseller detailing the investigation of the killings. Tucked away as a footnote, the author included a few esoteric quotes and bits of trivia; among these were comments by the Chief Medical Examiner who'd overseen the autopsies. According to the ME, it was fortunate picture ID was present on scene for the deceased. By the time the authorities arrived, animals had gotten to the bodies, even the one in the cabin. The examiner said she'd been tempted to note in her report that in thirty years she'd never seen anything so bizarre or savage as these particular bites, but wisely reconsidered.

The Men From Porlock

This version taken from *The Beautiful Thing That Awaits Us All and Other Stories*, 2013
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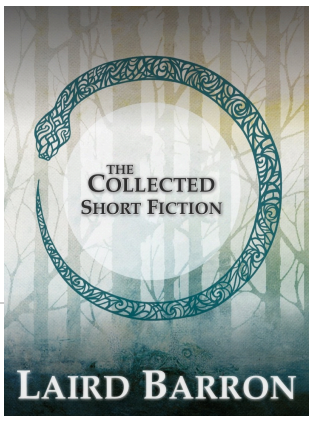

September, 1923

Darkness lay stone heavy as men roused, drawn from inner night by the tidal pull of blood, the weight of bones sagging outward through their flesh. Floorboards groaned beneath the men who shuffled and stamped like dray horses in the gloom of the bunkhouse. Star glow came through chinks in slat siding. Someone had lighted the stove and smoke drifted among the bunks, up to the rafters. It had rained during the night and the air was ghastly damp. Expelled breath gathered on the beams and dripped steadily; condensation oozing as from stalactites of a limestone cave. The hall reeked with the stench of a bunker: creosote and sweat, flatulence and rotten teeth and the bitter tang of ashes and singed tobacco.

Miller hunched nearly double at the long, rough-hewn pine table and ate lumpy dick and molasses for breakfast. He scooped it with a tin spoon from a tin pan blackened and scarred from a thousand fires and the abuses of a thousand spoons. When he'd done, he wiped his mustache on the sleeve of his long johns and drank black coffee from a tin cup, the last element of his rural dining set.

His hands were dirty and horned with calluses from Swede saw and felling axe. He'd broken them a few times over the years and his knuckles were swollen as walnuts. He couldn't make a tight fist with the left hand; most mornings his fingers froze into a crab claw barely fit to manage his Willie, much less hook an axe handle. At least he was young—most of the old timers were missing fingers, or had been busted up in a hundred brutal ways—from accidents to fistfights to year after year of the slow, deadly attrition from each swing of mattock or axe. Olsen the Swede (first among the many Swedes west of the Rockies) got his leg shattered by a chain as a kid and hopped around the camp with his broadhead axe for a crutch. His arch-rival

Sven the Norwegian (first among innumerable logger Norwegians south of Norway) lost his teeth and an ear while setting chokers back in the Old World—setting chokers was dog's work no matter what country. Even Manfred the German, known and admired for his quick reflexes, had once been tagged by an errant branch; his skull was soft in places and hairless as if he'd survived a fire, and one eye drooped much lower than the other. Lately Manny had climbed the ladder to donkey puncher. A man wasn't likely to be injured while running a donkey; if anything went wrong he'd be mangled, mutilated and killed with a minimum of suffering.

One of the Poles, a rangy, affable fellow named Kasper, frequently asked Miller if he planned to get out before he got his head lopped off, or his legs snapped, or was cut in half by a whip-cracking choker cable, or ended up with a knife stuck in his ribs during a saloon brawl. Perhaps Miller was as pigheaded as most men his age and addicted to the security of quick money in a trade few wanted and fewer escaped?

As for himself, Kasper claimed to be cursed rather than stubborn—madness ran through his blood and yoked him to cruel labor, the wages of sin committed by an overweening ancestor in the dim prehistory of Eastern Europe. The Pole wrote poems and stories by lamplight, although his English translations were so poor it would've been difficult to know exactly how to rate his poetry. Miller wasn't keen for the art of letters, although he possessed a grudging admiration for those who were clever with words. His own grandmother had studied overseas as a girl. After she shipped back to the U.S., she kept her diaries in Latin to confound nosy relatives. She showed them to Miller when he visited her home in Illinois—grandma filled up seventy-five of the slim, clothbound tomes, a minor library.

Today, Kasper sat on the long form far from Miller, another bleary shade among jostling elbows and grinding jaws. Miller was fine with that arrangement—all day yesterday the Pole worked with him on an eight-foot saw, a misery whip, to take down an old monster cedar. He knew, as did everyone else, Miller was among the loose contingent of veterans inhabiting Slango Camp.

The Pole confided: *My oldest brother was shot by a sniper along the Rheine. He was killed with one of those fucking German "mousers"—the big rifles they shoot with. Our family lives in Warszawa and only found out*

what happened because one of my brother's comrades was with him when it happened and relayed the bad news and mailed home his personal effects. The Legiony sent my brother home in a simple box. I guess there was some confusion at the train depot because so many plain wooden boxes filled up the freight cars and the boxes had serial numbers instead of names. The people in charge of these things mixed up the manifest lists, so my family and the other families had to pry apart the boxes to figure out who was inside each one. They didn't send an official death notice until several weeks after the funeral, which I could not attend. I could not afford to travel home for a funeral. My little sister and cousin died last year. Cholera. It is very bad back home, the cholera. I couldn't go to her funeral, either. They buried her in our village. My brother was buried in another village because that is where my father's people come from. All the men in our family are buried there. Probably not me, that would be too expensive, but my other brothers, certainly. None of them are interested in coming to America. They are happy in Polska.

This monologue had come at Miller over the course of many hours and became intelligible to his ear only after the third or fourth cycle. He grunted nominal responses where necessary. Finally, after they toppled the tree and prepared to call it a day, he effectively ended the conversation by unplugging his canteen and dumping its contents over his head until steam lifted from him. He'd looked the Pole in the eye and said, *At least they found enough of him to pack in a box. That's a pretty good deal if you think about it.*

Slango was small as camps went—two bunkhouses, the filing house, courtesy car, company store, a couple of storage sheds; no electricity, no indoor plumbing, nothing fancy. Bullhead & Co. played fast and loose, a shoestring operation one or two notches above a gyppo outfit. The owner and his partners ran the offices from distant Seattle and Olympia and rumor had it they'd eventually be swallowed up by Weyerhaeuser or another giant.

According to some, Bullhead himself visited once the prior year and stayed for several days in the Superintendent's car on the company engine, *John Henry*. This surprised Miller; Slango Camp lay entrenched in the rugged foothills of Mystery Mountain, a heavily forested region of the Olympic Range. The camp was a good sixteen miles from the main rail line, and

from there another eighteen miles from the landing at Bridgewater Junction. The spur to Slango Camp plunged through a temperate jungle of junk hemlock, poplar and skinny evergreens, peckerwood, so-called, and nearly impassable underbrush-seas of devil's club, blackberry brambles, and alder. The loggers spanned the many gullies and ravines with hastily chopped junk trees to support rickety track. It seemed improbable anybody, much less a suit, would visit such a Godforsaken place unless they had no other choice.

Miller stowed his kit and dressed in his boots and suspenders and heavy jacket. The initial sullen mutters of exhausted men coalesced and solidified around him and evolved into crude, jocular banter fueled by food and coffee and the fierce comradery of doomed souls. He'd seen it in the trenches in France between thudding barrages of artillery, the intermittent assaults by German infantry who stormed in with their stick grenades and "mousers" as Kasper said, and finally, hand to hand, belly to belly in the sanguine mud of shoulder-width tunnel walls, their bayonets and knives. He seldom made sense of those days—the mortar roars, the fumaroles from incendiary starbursts boiling across the divide, eating the world; the frantic bleats of terrorized animals, and boys in their muddy uniforms, their blackened helmets like butcher's pots upended to keep the brains in until the red, shearing moment came to let them out.

He went into the cold and wet. Light filtered through the trees. Mist seeped from the black earth and coiled in screens of brush and branches and hung in tatters like remnant vapors of dry ice. Men drifted, their chambray coats and wool sock hats dark blobs in the gathering white. Even as he shivered off that first clammy embrace of morning fog, mauls began to smash spikes and staples into the planed logs laid alongside the edges of the camp. Axes clanged from the depths of the forest, ringing from metal-tough bark. The bull gang paid cables from the iron bulk of the donkey engine. The boys shackled the cable to the harnesses of a six oxen team and drove them, yipping and hollering, into the mist that swallowed the skidder trail—a passage of corduroy spearing straight through the peckerwood and underbrush, steadily ascending the mountain flank where the big timber lay ripe for the slaughter.

“Miller!” McGrath the straw boss gestured to him from the lee of the company store. McGrath was one of the old boys who haunted logging camps everywhere—sinewy and grizzled and generally humorless; sharp-eyed as a blackbird and possessed of the false merriment of one as well. He was Superintendent Barrett’s foreman, the voice and the fist of his authority. Plug tobacco stained the corners of his mouth. Veins made ridges and valleys in his forehead and neck and the backs of his leathery hands. A lot of the men regarded him with antipathy, if not naked hatred. But that was the compact between peasants and overseers since the raising of the Pyramids.

Miller acknowledged the dynamic and accepted the state of things with equanimity. He actually felt a bit sorry for the boss, saw in the scarred and taciturn and blustering foreman the green youth who’d been ragged raw and harrowed by the elders of his day, exactly the same as every other wet-behind-the-ears kid, discerned that those scars had burrowed in deeper than most would ever know.

“Miller, boy!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Been here, what—two weeks?”

“I guess that’s right, sir.” Really it was closer to six weeks since he’d signed on in Bridgewater and road the train to Slango with a half dozen other new hands.

“Huh. Two whole weeks and we ain’t had us a jaw. I guess we jawin’ now. You a good shot, boy?”

“I dunno about that, sir.”

McGrath grinned to spit chaw and rubbed his mouth. “You was a rifleman in the Army, wasn’t you? A sniper? That’s what I hear. You a real keener.”

“Marines, sir.” Miller looked at his feet. One of the men, probably Rex or Hagen, had talked. A group of them went hunting white tails a couple of Sundays back. They’d been skunked all day and taken to passing around one of the bottles of rotgut hooch Gordy Thompson kept stashed in his footlocker, and swapping lies about the battles they’d fought and the women they’d fucked and who was the lowest of the lowdown mutts in

Slango, which boiled down to McGrath or Superintendent Barret, of course, and who wouldn't like to toe the line if it meant a shot at one of those bastards.

The party was heading toward camp to beat darkness when Rex, the barrel-chested brute from Wenatchee, proffered a drunken wager nobody could peg a stump he marked by pinning it with an empty cigarette pack some two hundred yards from their position. Like an idiot, Miller casually opined he could nail a stump from at least twice that distance. Everybody was three sheets to the wind; rowdy wagers were laid. Dosed on whiskey or not, Miller's hands remained steady. He fired five rounds from the British Enfield he'd carried home from the Front, rapidly jacking the bolt action to eject each shell and chamber the next bullet—eight of ten rounds in a pattern that obliterated the illustration of a horse and carriage. Floyd Hagen covered the wreckage with a silver dollar as the men murmured and whistled amongst themselves.

"Where you from?"

"Utah."

"You live in the hills, then? You a Mormon?"

"No sir, I'm not a Mormon. My people are Catholic."

"Yeah? I figure everybody in Utah for a Mormon. They run the regular folks out on rails is what I hear."

"Well, I don't know what they do in Salt Lake, sir. We were raised Catholic. The Mormons left us alone."

"But your people lived in the hills, din't they?"

"That's so."

"What I thought. You a hillbilly, I seen it straight away. Me too. North Carolina, Blue Ridges. We know all about squirrel stew, an' opossum pie, ain't that right? You got opossum in Utah, don't you, boy?"

Behind Miller's left eye the world cracked and vomited blood—red sky limning a benighted prairie of scrub and slick pebbles like the scales on the spine of the Ouroboros. In the seam of the horizon a jackrabbit flew from rock to rock.

“That Polack said you shot a bunch of Huns in the war. That right, boy? You pick off some Huns?” McGrath grinned and spat again, sent a withering stream of acid against the plank skirting of the shack. “Nah, don’t worry about that. My grandpappy was in Antietam and he didn’t talk about it none either. They’s a photographer comin’ in on the *John Henry*. Be here this weekend. Cookie wants a couple nice bucks for supper. I’m thinkin’ you, Horn, Ruark, Bane, and Stevens can take the day off, go git us some meat. Oh, and Calhoun. He smashed his thumb the other day. Cain’t hold an axe, but maybe he kin skin with his good hand, huh? Useless as teats onna boar ’round here.”

“A photographer.” That meant a distraction of the highest order, surpassed only by visits from upper management. This outside scrutiny also meant the bosses would be bigger pricks than usual.

“Some greenhorn named Chet Goul-ee-ay. Goddamned Frenchies. The Supe says we gotta squire him around, wipe his ass an’ sich. Put on the dog an’ pony show.”

“I’m in the cedar stand with Ma today.” Miller raised his head to follow a jay as it skimmed the roof and landed on a moss-bearded shake. A camp robber. The bird fluffed its gray feathers and watched him and the straw boss.

“I ain’t sendin’ Ma with you. He cain’t shoot worth shit. That I know.”

“Somebody’s got to pack the meat downhill.”

“Okay. Take him too. Seven, that’s a good number, anyhow. Maybe you boys’ll get lucky.”

Miller went to the bunkhouse and fetched his frame pack and rifle and slipped a knife into his belt. He stuck some shells into his jacket pockets and helped himself to biscuits and beans from the cook shack. There were four cooks. Two stout, no-nonsense types, and two doughty women renowned for their severity and parsimony with seasonings. The dour quartet bossed around a squad of bottle washers and scullery maids. The chief cook, Angus Clemson grudgingly handed over the vittles, grumping that he hadn’t been given prior notice of this raid upon his stores. Leftovers

were the best he could do—and Miller had best be damned grateful for the courtesy.

The impromptu expedition took some time to organize and it was nearly midday before the other men had gathered the necessary supplies and were ready to venture forth.

Calhoun, Horn, and Ma met him in the yard. Calhoun was a tall lad; hard-bitten and deadly serious. His left thumb was wrapped in a bandage. Despite his youth and hard bark, he'd proved meticulously groomed and well-spoken. Ma was shorter, and wide as a mattock handle across the shoulders. His hair hung long and oily over a prodigious brow and his eyes shone dull yellow. He spoke seldom and when he did, his Welsh slur rendered him largely unintelligible. His raw strength was the stuff of legend. He could walk off with three hundred pounds of cable looped over his shoulders as if it were nothing. He'd once grabbed a planed log that took three men to move and hoisted it overhead with a grunt and a groan before heaving it onto a pile; on another legendary occasion he singlehandedly dragged a cast iron camp stove of at least a quarter ton out of the mud before other men could finish harnessing the mules. Ma wasn't challenged to many arm wrestling or Indian wrestling matches.

Thaddeus Horn, a rawboned youngster raised in the finest Kentucky backwater tradition, wore a coonskin cap slick with grease and dirt, declared it had been in his family for three generations. Flattened and hideously bleached and hopping with bugs as the cap appeared to be, Miller scarcely doubted the assertion. The youth packed a massive Springfield rifle that could've been a relic from the days of the Texas Revolution, or a buffalo gun Sam Houston might've fired over the ramparts of the Alamo—although Cullen Ruark swore by his Big Fifty and Moses Bane scoffed goodnaturedly and bragged *his* antique Rigby could knock down a small tree if he cut loose both barrels at once.

Miller asked Horn if he'd seen Stevens or the others. The kid waved toward the hills, said he figured the trio decided to hightail it before the straw boss changed his mind and sent them all back to hacking at trees.

They hiked up out of camp, slogging through the wastes and ruins of a vast swath of clear-cut land. The near slopes were littered with shorn stumps and

orange sheaves of bark. The sundered loam oozed sap and water like a great open wound. Bombs might've caused such devastation, or perhaps Proteus himself rose from the depths to rip loose the skin of the ancient mountain, peeled it away to bare the granite bones.

Bane, Ruark, and Stevens awaited them at the boundary where deep forest began. Three pack-mules were tethered nearby, munching on weeds. Ruark was a wiry galoot. His snow-white beard touched the middle button of his leather vest. Nobody knew much about Ruark—he didn't say two words on any given day, but he swung an axe like a fiend from Hell. Moses Bane was another old-timer, hair just as snowy, yet even shaggier. He was also much fleshier than Ruark and scarred around the eyes and nose and almost as bullishly powerful as Ma. A lot of the younger hands called him Grampa Moses. He was a bit more talkative than his pal Ruark, especially after he'd gotten a snootful. It was said the duo served in the Spanish-American War as scouts. Neither spoke of it, however.

Both men were loaded like Sherpas—bedrolls, ropes, and hooch jugs; rifles, single shot pistols, axes, skinning knives, and God knew what all. Miller felt weary from simply looking at the old boys.

Stevens lounged on the butt of a deadfall and smoked an Old Mill from a bashed pack he stuffed in his front pocket. He rested a lever action Winchester across his knees. A few years older than Miller and almost handsome after a rough fashion. His hair was dark and shaggy and fell near the collar of his canvas vest. Some said Stevens was the best topper at Slango; he certainly clambered up trees with the speed and agility of a raccoon.

Miller privately disdained this popular assessment—if the man was *that* good McGrath wouldn't have turned him loose to poach deer, visiting photographer or not. Bullhead & Co. ran entirely too close to the margin—Superintendent Barret had announced a few days beforehand that the home office expected to see the Slango region logged and its timber on rail flats by Valentine's Day. This produced a few sniggers and wisecrack asides about Paul and Babe signing on to right the ship. Neither Barret nor McGrath laughed and it was plain to see Slango would be upping stakes or folding its tents by midwinter.

“Boys,” Stevens said.

“Whatch ya got there?” Horn eyed a glass jug in the weeds by Stevens’ boot.

“Hooch,” Stevens said.

“Well, guddamn, I seen that,” Horn said. “Ma got some, too. Regular heathen firewater. Right, Ma?”

Ma ignored them, his attention fixed on a mosquito growing fat with blood on his misshapen thumb knuckle. The stupid intensity of the Welshman’s fascination made Miller slightly sick to his stomach.

“Yeh,” Stevens said. “May not bag us a deer, but we gonna get shit-drunk tryin’.” He picked up the jug and put it in a burlap bag. He tied the bag to his pack and slipped the pack over his shoulders and began trudging into the woods.

“Okay!” Horn followed him, the Springfield slung loosely over his shoulder. Ma went close behind them and Miller hung slightly back to avoid being slashed across the face by sprung branches. The sun had burned through the overcast, but its rays fell weak and diffuse here in the cool, somber vault of the forest. The air lay thick and damp as if they’d shuffled into the belly of a crypt.

None of them was familiar with the environs beyond Slango. However, Stevens had borrowed a topographical map from the Superintendent’s car and they decided to follow the ridges above Fordham Creek. The surveyors who’d originally explored the area had noted a sizable deer population in the hinterlands upstream. Eschewing a group council, Bane and Ruark silently moved ahead of the group to cut for sign.

The old growth trees were enormous. These were the elders, rivals to the Redwood Valley sequoias that predated Christ, the Romans, everything but the wandering tribes of China and Persia. Crescents of white fungus bit into slimy folds of bark and laddered toward the canopy. Leaves had begun to drop and the ground was slimy with their brown and yellow husks. Vast mushroom beds, fleshy and splendorous, lay in shallow grottos of root and rock. Horn tromped across one in childish glee. Hooting and cackling, he grabbed Ma by the arm and the pair jigged in the pall of green smoke. Horn

had been drinking heavily, or so Miller hoped. He dreaded to think the boy was so simple and maniacal as a matter of inbreeding.

Birds and squirrels chattered from secret perches and Horn abruptly blasted his rifle at a roosting ptarmigan as the group negotiated a steep defile of a dry stream bed. Leaves and wood exploded and it was impossible to determine whether the bird flew away or was blown to bits. The unexpected boom caused Stevens and Miller to drop to their knees. Horn staggered from the recoil and lost his footing on the slippery rocks. He slid ass over teakettle down the slope and crashed into some brambles. The mules skittered free and bolted into the brush and it required a good half hour to recapture them.

Steven scowled at the boy. He gained his feet and hesitated as if contemplating violence. Then he laughed and unlimbered his jug and had a pull. Afterward, he handed the jug to Miller. Miller took a snort of the sweet, dark whiskey and lost his breath for a few seconds. Stars shot through his vision. “Careful, sonny boy. That’ll curl your toes—my Daddy makes it himself. Finest Californee awerdenty you’re likely to sample in this lifetime.”

Miller would’ve agreed if his voice hadn’t been burned to ash in his throat.

Bane and Ruark emerged from the undergrowth and reported they’d located a large hollow not far below the chaparral and possibly that supply of deer meat the boss so badly desired. Spoor was plentiful at least. There were several high vantages and effecting a killing field shouldn’t prove difficult. If all went well, the party would bag their prizes and return safely to Slango by tomorrow night.

The expedition made camp within a tiny clearing in the lee of a slab of rock jutting from the hillside. The outcropping loomed, thick with tufts of moss and lichen. They gathered wood and built a bonfire and sawed rounds from a log to seat themselves in the glare of the flames. The men stuck their hands near the fire. It was bitter cold. Each evening the snowline crept lower, dragging its veil of white dust.

Darkness blotted out the landscape. Embers streamed through notches in the canopy and swirled among the stars. Stoic, brooding Ma unpacked his fiddle and sawed a lively jig for the boys, who clogged in time while

tending the mules and cooking supper. The Welshman's expression remained remote and dull as ever. His hands moved like mechanisms that operated independently of his brutish mind, or as though plucked and maneuvered by the strings of a muse. Idiocy and genius were too often part and parcel of a man. Miller grinned and tapped his toe to the rhythm, however, the ever watchful segment of his brain that took no joy in anything wondered how far the light and music penetrated into the black forest, how far their shouts and hoots echoed along gullies and draws. And his smile faded.

Supper was roasted venison, Indian bread, and coffee, a couple of fingers of moonshine in the dregs for dessert. Conversation and fiddle-accompaniment ebbed and for a while everyone fell into reverie, heads cocked toward the whispering wind as it brushed the treetops. Night birds warbled and small creatures rustled in the leaves.

"They's stories 'bout these parts," Bane said with an abruptness that caught Miller off guard. Bane and Ruark had laid out an array of knives, tomahawks, and sundry accessories for oiling and sharpening. Ruark hefted an Arkansas Toothpick, turning it this way and that so it gleamed in the firelight. Bane painstakingly stroked a whetstone across the edge of his felling axe. A lump of chaw bulged his cheek. "Legends, guess ya might say." It was no secret how much 'Grandpa Moses' loved to spin a yarn. His companions immediately paid heed, leaning closer toward where he sat, white hair and beard wild and snarled, little orange sparks shooting as he rasped his axe.

Horn became agitated. "Aww, don't cha go on, old man. No call for that kinda talk while we're hunkered here in the woods at night. No sir, no sir."

Stevens guffawed. "What's a matter, kid? Your mama put the fright in you back in Kentucky?"

"Hush yer mouth 'bout my mama."

"Easy, kid. Don't get your bristles up."

Miller didn't speak, yet misgiving nagged him. He'd dwelt among the Christian devout as well as the adherents of mystical traditions. There were those who believed to speak of a thing was to summon it into the world, to lend it form and substance, to imbue it with power. He wasn't sure how to

feel about such theories. However, something within him, perhaps the resident animal, empathized with the kid's fear. Mountain darkness was a physical weight pressing down and it seemed to *listen.*

Bane paused to gaze into the darkness that encroached upon the circle of the cheery blaze. Then he looked Stevens dead in the eye. "I knew this Injun name o' Ravenfoot back to Seattle who come from over Storm King Mountain way. Klallam Injun. His people have hunted this neck o' the woods afore round eyes ever hollowed canoes. He told me an' I believe the red man knows his stuff."

"Who'd believe an Injun about anything?" Stevens said. "Superstitious bastards."

"Yeah. An' what tickled yer fancy to speak up now?" Horn said, his tone still sour and fearful. Ma squatted near him, head lowered, digging into the dirt with a knife. Miller could tell the brute was all ears, though.

"That map of your'n," Bane said to Stevens.

"What the hell are you chinnin' about? The map? Now that don't make any kind of sense." Stevens took the map from his pocket, unrolled it and squinted.

"Where'd you get that?" Miller said, noting the paper's ragged border. "Tear it from a book?"

"I dunno. McGrath gave it to me. Prolly he got it from the Supe."

Now Bane's eyes widened. "My grand pappy was a right reverend and a perfessor. Had lots o' books lyin' 'round the house when I was a sprat."

"You can *read*, Moses?" Calhoun spoke from where he reclined with the wide brim of his hat pulled low. The men chuckled, albeit nervously.

"Oh, surely," Bane said. "I kin read, an' also write real pretty when I take a notion."

"Recites some nice poetry, too," Ruark said without glancing up from whetting his knife. "I'm partial to the Shakespeare." These were the first and only words he'd uttered all day.

"But Grand pappy was a dyed in the wool educated feller. He took the Gospel Word to them heathens in Eastern Europe an' the jungles of Africa,

an’ some them islands way, way down in the Pacific. Brought back tales turn yer hair white.”

“Aha, that’s what happened to your hair!” Stevens said. “Here I thought you was just old.”

Bane laughed, then spat. “Yeh, so I am, laddio. This is a haunted place. Explorers wandered ’round Mystery Mountain in the 1840s. Richies in the city, newspapermen mostly, financed ’em. Found mighty peculiar things, they say. Burial mounds ’an cliffside caves with bodies in ’em like the Chinee do. A few o’ them explorers fell on hard luck an’ got kilt, or lost. Some tried to pioneer and disappeared, but one a ’em, a Russian, came back an’ wrote hisself a book. An pieces o’ that book wound up in another one, a kind o’ field guide. Looks like a *Farmer’s Almanac*, ’cept black with a broken circle on the cover. I seen that page afore. Ain’t too many copies o’ that guide not what got burned. My mama was a child o’ God and hated it on account o’ its pagan blasphemy, documentin’ heathen rites an’ sich. Grand pappy showed me in secret. He weren’t a particularly devout feller after he finished spreadin’ the Lord’s Word. Had a crisis o’ faith, he said.”

“Well, what did the Russkie find?” Calhoun said.

“Don’t recall, ’xactly.” Bane leaned the axe against his knee and sighed. “Ruins, mebbe. Mebbe he lied, ’cause ain’t nobody backed his claims. He was a snake oil salesman, I reckon. They run him outta the country.”

“I think,” Miller said, “that’s an amazing coincidence, your ending up on this hunt. Could be you’re pulling our legs.”

“Mebbe. But I ain’t. God’s truth.”

“*Arri, arri.*“ Ma scowled and stabbed at the ground. His voice was thick as cold mush.

“Sounds like Ma thinks that redskin mumbo-jumbo rubbed off on you,” Stevens said. “Why’n blue blazes did you volunteer to come along if this place is lousy with bad medicine?”

“Hell, son. McGrath done volunteered me.”

“Have at it, then.” Calhoun raised his hat with one finger. “What’s so spooky about Mystery Mountain?”

“Besides the burial mounds and the cave crypts, and them disappeared explorers,” Stevens said with a smirk.

“Oh, they’s a passel o’ ghosts an’ evil spirits, an’ sich,” Bane said, again glancing into the night. “Demons live in holes in the ground. Live in the rocks and sleep inside big trees in the deep forest where the sun don’t never shine. Ravenfoot says the spirits sneak up in the dark an’ drag poor sleepin’ sods to Hell.”

“Hear that, Thad?” Stevens nodded at Horn. “Best sleep with one eye open.”

“I hearda one,” Ruark said, and his companions became so quiet the loudest noise was the pop and sizzle of burning sap. He spat on his whetstone and continued sharpening the knife. “Y’all remember the child’s tale Rumpelstiltskin? The king ordered the miller’s daughter to spin straw to gold or die, an’ a little man, a dwarf, came to her an’ said he’d do the job if’n she promised him her firstborn child? Done deal an’ she didn’t get her head chopped off.”

“They got themselves hitched and made a bunch of papooses,” Stevens said. “Everybody heard that story.”

“How’n hell that dwarf spin straw to gold?” Horn said. He took a swig of hooch and belched.

“Magic, you jackass,” Calhoun said.

“Lil’ fucker was the spawn o’ Satan, that’s how,” Bane said.

“The king made her his queen an’ everthin’ was hunkum-bunkum for a while,” Ruark said. “Then, o’ course, along comes baby an’ who shows up to collect his due? She convinces him to give her until the dark o’ the moon to guess his name an’ call off the deal. So bein’ a cantankerous cuss, the feller agrees. He knows his name is so odd she hasn’t a snowball’s chance in hell o’ sussing it out.” He paused and finally looked up from his work and slowly met the wondering gaze of each man riveted to his words. “But that ol’ girl *did* cotton to the jig. She sent messengers to the four corners o’ the land, their only mission to gather a list o’ names. One o’ them men reported a queer sight he’d spied in a deep, dark mountain valley. The scout saw a mighty fire below and who danced ’round that blaze but a pack o’ demons led by the little gold-spinner hisself. The dwarf cackled an’

capered, boasting that his name was Rumpelstiltskin. He was mad as a wet hen when the queen turned the tables later on. He stomped a hole in the palace floor an' fell into the earth. That was the end o' him."

"That's a pretty happy ending, you ask me," Miller said as he pondered the incongruity of camping in the remote mountains with a company of dog-faced loggers and listening to one of them butcher the Rumpelstiltskin fairytale.

"Well, that part about the demons jumpin' 'round the fire an' calling up the forces o' darkness, some say they seen similar happenins in these hills. They say if'n you creep along the right valley in the dead o' night 'round the dark o' the moon you'll hear 'em singin' an' chantin'."

"Hear who?" Calhoun said.

Ruark kind of smiled and shook his head and said no more.

"I'm turnin' in," Horn said and jumped to his feet. "Ain't listenin' to a bit more o' this nonsense. No siree Bob." He stomped a few feet away and rolled out his blanket and climbed under it so only the crown of his cap and the barrel of his rifle were showing.

"Too bad your mama ain't here to tuck you in and sing a lullaby," Stevens called.

"Told you to shuddup 'bout my mama," Horn said.

Calhoun chucked a stick of wood, bounced it off the kid's head. That broke the mood and everybody guffawed, and soon the company crawled into their blankets to catch some shuteye.

Miller roused with an urge to piss. A moment later he lay frozen, listening to the faint and unearthly strains of music. Initially, he thought it the continuation of dream he'd had of sitting in the balcony of a fancy court while the queen in her dress and crown entertained a misshapen dwarf who wore a curious suit and a plumed hat, while in the background Ruark narrated in a thick accent, but no, this music was real enough, although it quavered at the very edge of perception. An orchestra of woodwinds and strings buoyed a choir singing in a foreign tongue. This choir's harmony

rose and fell with the swirls of wind, the creaking of the sea of branches in the dark above him. He couldn't tell how far off the singers might be. Sound traveled strangely in the wild, was all the more tricky in the mountains.

"Ya hear that?" Calhoun said. Miller could barely make out the gleam of his eyes in the light of the coals. The young man's whisper was harsh with fear. "The hell is that?"

"The wind, maybe," Miller said after a few moments passed and the music faded and didn't resume. The sky slowly lightened to pearl with tinges of red. He rose and ventured into the brush, did his business and wiped his hands with dead leaves and fir needles. Ruark was moving around by the time Miller returned. The old logger kindled the fire and put on coffee and biscuits. That drew the others, grumbling and muttering, from their bedrolls.

No one mentioned anything about voices or music, not even Calhoun, so Miller decided to keep his own counsel lest they think him addled. This was desolate country and uninhabited but for the occasional trapper. He'd heard the wind and nothing else. Soon, he pushed the mystery aside and turned his thoughts toward the day's hunt.

Breakfast was perfunctory and passed without conversation. The party struck camp and headed northwest, gradually climbing deeper into the folds of Mystery Mountain. Sunlight reached fingers of gold through the canopy and cast a tiger stripe pattern over the shrubbery and giant ferns and the sweating boles of the trees. The pattern rippled as leaves rippled and shifted in a way that might hypnotize a man if he stared at it too hard. Miller blinked away the stupor and trudged along until they crested a bluff and found the wide, irregular bog Bane had spoken of the previous evening. The fellow had been correct—there was deer sign everywhere. The party fanned out in pairs and settled behind screens of brush to wait.

Miller dropped one as it entered the field at the edge of his weapon's effective range, while Stevens, Bane, and Ruark each bagged one in the middle ground. Unfortunately, Horn's lone shot merely injured his prey and it darted into the woods, forcing him, Ma, and Calhoun to pursue.

By noon three bucks were skinned and quartered. The men loaded the mules and strapped smaller cuts to their own packs and prepared to set off

for Slango. Ma, Horn, and Calhoun remained in the forest pursuing the wounded buck.

"Damnation," Bane said, shading his eyes against the sun. "We gonna be travelin' in the dark as it is. Those green-hands dilly-dally much longer an' it's another biv-oo-ack tonight."

"Hell with that. We don't hoof it back by sundown McGrath will have our hides, sure as the Lord made little green apples." Stevens unplugged the moonshine and had a swig. His face shone with sweat from the skinning and toting. "Here's what I propose. Miller, you and Ruark take the mules and skedaddle back to Slango. Me and Bane will go round up our wayward friends and catch you two down the trail. Let's get a move on, eh?"

Miller swatted at the clouds of swarming gnats and flies. A rifle boomed in the middle distance. Again after a long interval, and a third time. A universal signal of distress. That changed everything. Stevens, Bane, and Ruark frantically shucked the meat and hot-footed in the direction of the gunshots. Miller spent several minutes dumping the saddlebags from the mules and tethering them near a waterhole before setting after his comrades. He moved swiftly, bent over to follow their tracks and broken branches they'd left in their wake. He drew the Enfield from its scabbard and cradled the rifle to his breast.

Into the forest. And gods, the trees were larger than ever there along a shrouded ridge that dropped into a deep gulf of shadows and mist. He was channeled along a trail that proved increasingly treacherous. Water streamed from upslope, digging notches through moss and dirt into the underlying rock. In sections the dirt and vegetation were utterly stripped to exposed plates of slick stone, veined red with alkali and the bloody clay of the earth. The trees were so huge, their lattice of branches so tight, it became dim as a shuttered vault, and chilly enough to see faint vapors of one's breath.

The game trail cut sharply into the hillside and eventually passed through a thick screen of saplings and devil's club and leveled into a marshy clearing. A handful of boulders lay sunken into the moss and muck around the trunks of three squat cottonwood trees. Surprisingly enough, there were odds and ends of human habitation carelessly scattered—rusted stovetops and empty

cans, rotted wooden barrels and planed timber, bits of old shattered glass and bent nails. Either the site of a ruined house, long swallowed by the earth, or a dumping ground. The rest of the men gathered at the rim of the hollow nearest a precipitous drop into the valley. Fast moving water rumbled from somewhere below.

Horn lay on his back, his boots propped on the body of the fallen buck. Ma and Calhoun were nowhere in evidence. Miller took it all in for a few moments. He finally shouldered his rifle and had a sip of water from his canteen. “He hurt?” He jerked his thumb at Horn. The boy’s coonskin cap had flown off and his long, greasy hair was a bird nest of leaves and twigs. A black and blue lump swelled above his eye.

“Nah, he ain’t hurt,” Stevens said. “Are ya, kid? He’s okay. Got the wind knocked outta him is all. Tripped over a damn root and busted his skull. He’ll be right as rain in a minute. Won’t ya, kid?”

Horn groaned and covered his eyes with his arm.

“He’s affrighted,” Bane said, and spat. The grizzled logger clutched his rifle in one hand and a tomahawk in the opposite. His knuckles were white. He kept moving his eyes.

“Afraid of what?” Miller said, surveying the area. He didn’t like the feel of the place, its dankness, the malformed cottonwoods, the garbage. He also disliked the fact Calhoun and Ma weren’t around.

Stevens and Bane glanced at each other and shrugged. Stevens squatted by Horn and patted his arm almost tenderly. “Wanna slug of this fine awerdenty, kid? Where’d those other boys get to, eh?” He helped Horn get seated upright, then held the jug for him while the kid had pull.

Ruark scowled and ambled to the drop and stared down into the valley. The water thumped and so did Miller’s heart. He tilted his head and stared through the opening above the clearing, regarded the brilliant blue-gold sky. Cloudless, immaculate. Already the sun was low against the peaks. Dark came early in the mountains. The sun seemed peculiar—it blurred and flames radiated from its core and its rim blackened like a coal.

Horn coughed and wiped his mouth on his wool sleeve. “Yeh, tripped an’ smacked muh noggin’. Weren’t no stob, though. No sir. They’s a snare

yonder. Prolly more where that come from.” He pointed and Bane went and examined the spot.

Bane whistled and said, “He ain’t blowin’ smoke. Step light, boys. We ain’t alone.”

“Bushwhackers,” Ruark said, turning with predatory swiftness to regard his comrade.

“Ain’t no bushwhackers.” Stevens rose and swiped at the gathering flies with his hat. “We maybe got us a trapper tucked into that park down there. That’s what we got.”

“Shit.” Bane lifted a piece of thin rope, its long end snaking off through the underbrush. He coiled in the slack and gave it a yank. A bell clanged nearby and Bane threw the rope and jumped back as if scalded. “Shit!”

“Yeh, shit!” Ruark said and stepped away from the ridgeline. He had his Sharps in hand now.

Miller said, “Thad, where’s Cal and Ma?”

Horn still appeared confused from the blow to his head, but the grave faces of his companions sobered him a bit. “Din’t see on account I was woozy for a spell. Heard ’em jawin’ with somebody that come up on us. Cal said to hang on, they’d be right back.”

“You act a mite nervous. Something else happen?”

The boy hesitated. “Din’t much care for the sound of whoever they was that jawed with Cal an’ Ma. Not ’tall. Sounded right wicked.”

“The hell does that mean?” Stevens said.

Horn shrugged and pulled on his cap.

“Shitfire!” Bane said, and spat.

“How long ago?” Miller said. He thought of hiding in the trenches during the war, scanning the gloom for signs of the enemy creeping forward. He’d learned, as did most men of violence, to recognize the scent of imminent peril. At that moment the scent was very strong indeed.

“I reckon half an’ hour ago. I blacked out for a while. Them shots snapped me outta it.”

Before the boy had finished speaking, Bane and Ruark slipped away to the edge of the clearing, cutting for sign. Ruark whistled and everyone but Horn hustled over. Just beyond a deadfall he'd found a well-beaten footpath. Their missing comrades had passed this way, and so had at least two others. Bane swore and cut a plug of chaw and jammed it in his mouth. He swore again, and spat. The four held a brief discussion and decided there might be trouble ahead so caution was advised. Miller would help Horn back to camp while the rest went on to find Calhoun and Ma. Horn got to his feet and joined them, visibly shaking off his unsteadiness. "Like hell. Ma is my boy. I'm goin'."

"Fine," Stevens said. "Moses, you lead the way." And the men proceeded along the path single file. The going was much easier than before as the path lay a few feet from the ridgeline and the hills, while steep, were much gentler than before.

Ten minutes later they came to a fork at the base of a dead red cedar. The bole of the cedar would've required four or five men to link hands to span its girth. It had sheared off at about the eighty foot mark. One fork of the trail continued along the ridge; the other descended into the valley, which was still mostly hidden by forest. Bootprints went both directions, but Bane and Ruark were confident there friends had travelled in the valley. Bane sniffed the air, then gestured downward. "Wood smoke."

"Sure enough," Miller said just then winding the tang of smoke. They'd proceeded only a few paces when he happened to look back and stopped with a hiss of warning to his companions.

"What is it?" Stevens said.

"That tree," Miller said, indicating a blaze mark on the downhill face of the big dead cedar—a stylized ring, broken on the sinister side. The symbol was roughly four feet across and gouged in a good three inches. Someone had daubed it in a thick reddish paint, now bled and mostly absorbed by the wood. It appeared petrified with age. Some inherent quality of the ring caused Miller's flesh to crawl. The light seemed to dim, the forest to close in.

Nobody said anything. Stevens produced a small spy glass and swept the area. He muttered and tossed the glass to Bane. Bane looked around. He

passed it to Ruark. Finally he swore and handed the glass back. Stevens in turn let Miller have a go. Stevens said, “I make out three more—there, there, and there.” He was correct. Miller spotted the other trees scattered along the hillside. Each was huge and dead, and each bore the weird glyph.

“I seen that mark afore,” Bane said in a reverential whisper.

“That book,” Miller said and Bane grunted. Miller asked for Stevens’ jug, hooked the handle with his pinky, mountain man fashion, and took a long, stout pull of the whiskey until black stars shot across his vision. Then he gasped for air and helped himself to another, healthier swig.

“Jaysus,” Stevens said when he finally retrieved his hooch. He shook the jug with a sad, amazed expression as if not quite comprehending how this could’ve happened to his stock.

“I don’t cotton to this ’tall,” Horn said. He rubbed the goose egg on his forehead. He was flour-pale.

“I’m with the pup,” Bane said. He spat. Ruark grunted agreement. He too spat a gob of Virginia Pride into the shrubbery.

Stevens crept up to the cedar and studied it intently, ran his fingers over the rough bark. He said, “Damn it all! Boys, lookee here.” As everyone clustered around he showed them how a great chunk of bark was separate from the tree. The slab of bark was as tall as three men, narrowing to a sharp peak. The outline, as of a door, was clear once they discerned it against the pattern. The bark door was hinged with sinew on one side.

“Whata ya reckon it is?” Horn said, backing away.

Watching Stevens trace the panel in search of a catch caused Miller’s anxiety to sharpen. The light was fading and far too early in the afternoon. The sun’s edge was being rapidly eaten by a black wave, creating a broken ring of fire and shadow. This phenomenon juxtaposed with the broken ring carved in the tree. Miller said, “Don’t boys! Just leave it!”

Stevens muttered his satisfaction at locating the catch. Bane and Stevens pulled the wooden panel three quarters of the way open and then stopped, bodies rigid as stone. From his vantage Miller couldn’t make out much of the hollow, gloomy interior, but the other two men stood with their necks

craned and Bane moaned, low and aggrieved as a fellow who'd been stabbed in the gut. "Sweet Lord in heaven!" Stevens said.

Miller took several broad steps to join them at the portal. He gazed within and saw…

…Something squirmed and uncoiled, a darker piece of darkness, and resolved into…

…His vision clouded violently and he staggered, was steadied by Ruark while Bane and Stevens sealed the panel, ramming it closed with their shoulders. They spun, faces white, wearing expressions of fear that were terrible to behold in men of such stern mettle.

"Good gawd, lookit the sky," Horn said. The moon occulted the sun and the world became a shadowy realm where every surface glowed and bloomed with a queer bluish-white light. Every living thing in the forest held its breath.

"Jaysus Mother Mary!" Ruark said, breaking the spell. "Jaysus Mother Mary Christ Almighty!"

And the men scrambled, tripped and staggered, grasping at branches to keep their footing. The eclipse lasted four minutes at most. The group reached the bottom as the moon and the sun slid apart and the world brightened by degrees. The valley was narrow and ran crookedly north and south. There were falls to the north and a small, shallow river wound its way through sandbars and intermittent stands of cottonwood and fallen spars and uprooted trunks.

A rustic village lay one hundred seventy or so yards distant upon the opposite side of the valley behind a low palisade of vertical logs—a collection of antique cottages and bungalows that extended as far as the middle heights of the terraced hillside. Several figures moved among the buildings, tending to chickens, hanging clothes. Stevens passed the scope around and it was confirmed that a handful of women were the only visible inhabitants.

Miller had marched similar villages in the European countryside where the foundations might be centuries old, perhaps dated from Medieval times. To encounter such a place here in the wilds of North America was incomprehensible. This town was wrong, utterly wrong, and the valley one

of the hidden places of the world. He'd never heard a whisper of the community and only God knew why people would dwell in secret. Perhaps they belonged to a religious sect that had fled persecution and wished to follow their faith in peace. He thought of the dreadful music from the previous night, the ominous drums, the blackening sun, and was not reassured.

Away from the central portion of the community loomed a stone tower with a crenellated parapet surmounted by a turret of shiny clay shingles that narrowed to a spike. The tower rose to a height of four stories, dominating the village and was constructed of bone-white stone notched at intervals by keyhole windows. The broken ring symbol had been painted in black ochre to the left of every window and upon the great ironbound oak doors at the tower's base. As with the symbol of the ring carved into the tree on the hillside, some combination of elements imbued the tower with menace that struck a chord deep inside Miller. His heart quickened and he looked over his shoulder at the way they'd come.

"Be dark soon," Stevens said. He also cast a furtive backward glance. Long shadows spread over the rushes and the open ground before them. The bloody sun hung a finger's breadth above the peaks and the sky was turning to rust. "These folks may be dangerous. Keep your guns ready."

Horn snatched at Bane's sleeve. "What'd y'all see back there?"

"Shut it, boy. Ain't gonna leave this valley goin' that direction. Nothin' more to tell."

"Yeah, shut it," Ruark said and gave the kid a shove to get him moving.

The company forded the river where it rushed shin deep, and moved to the village and passed through the open gate of the palisade after Stevens hailed the occupants. A dozen women of various ages paused in their chores and silently regarded the visitors. The women wore long, simple dresses of a distinctly Quaker style and dour bonnets and kerchiefs. They appeared well-fed and clean. Their teeth were white. Several of them immediately repaired to the central structure, a kind of longhouse. Most of the others went into the smaller houses. One of the younger girls smiled furtively at Miller.

Obviously she was simple. Her dress was cut low and revealed her buxom curves, her belly swollen with child and Miller blushed and turned his head away. Chickens pecked in the weeds. A couple of goats wandered around, and a small pack of mutts approached, yipping and snaffling at the men's legs.

A brawny matron with gray hair stepped forward to greet the company, and she too offered a friendly smile. "Hello, strangers. Welcome." Her accent and mannerisms seemed off-kilter, indefinably foreign.

"Beggin' your pardon, Ma'am." Stevens doffed his hat, clutched it nervously. "Our apologies to intrude and all, but we're on the trail of a couple old boys who belong to our group. We're hopin' you might've seen 'em." His voice shook and he and Bane continued to cast worried glances over their shoulders. For his part, Miller had spent the past few minutes convincing himself he'd seen a coon or porcupine in the dead tree. Maybe a drowsing black bear.

To further distract and calm his galloping imagination, he studied the lay of the land. The houses were made of smoothed rocks and mortared stone and the windows were tiny and mostly without glass, protected from the elements by means of thick drapes and shutters. The dirt paths were grooved and hardened to iron with age. The hillside climbed steeply through trees and undergrowth, although its face was mostly rock. A cave mouth opened beneath an overhang. He'd thought perhaps some eccentric industrialist had possibly created a replica of a medieval town and transplanted its citizens, but the closer he inspected it, the more its atmosphere seeped into him, and he understood this was something far stranger.

The matron apparently observed the tension among the loggers. She said, "Dear gentlemen, ye have nothing to fear. Be at peace."

"We're not afraid, Missus," Miller said. He used a gruff tone because the woman unnerved and unsettled him with her odd accent, her antiquated primness, the manner in which she cocked her head like a living doll. How the whites of her eyes were overcome by black. "But we *are* in a powerful hurry."

“The men will soon return from the gathering and ye shall treat with them. Until then, please rest.” The matron waved them toward some benches near the statue of a figure in robes, two children of equally indeterminate sex crouched at its feet. The statue was defaced by weather and green mold. One grotesquely elongated hand stretched forth as if to part a curtain to reveal some dark mystery. The children’s necks were cruelly bent, tongues distended, spines humped and exposed as if flayed by a butcher’s knife. The larger figure’s dangling hand caressed their bowed heads. “Girls, see to fetching our guests pie and lemonade.” The two younger women disappeared into the longhouse, as did the one who’d smiled at Miller. They moved with the ponderous grace of soon-to-be mothers.

Miller wondered if all of the girls were with child and wished he’d paid more attention. It seemed important. He said to the matron, “How did you come to build this village? It’s not on any maps.”

“Isn’t it?” the woman said and for an instant her smile became sly as a predator of the wood. “Our hamlet is very old and was carried across the sea by our founders when Sir Raleigh still served the Queen’s pleasure. This is a place of worship, of communion and far, far from wicked civilizations of men. The nights are long in this valley. The days are gloomy. It is perfect.”

Stevens wrung his hat and fidgeted. “If you don’t mind, Ma’am, we need to locate our friends and be on our way before the sun goes down. Could you kindly point the way? Tracks show they come through here.”

“You saw them, of course,” Miller said. He decided what it was about the woman’s speech that bothered him: Her voice was hoarse, the cadences unbalanced, her intonation stilted because she wasn’t accustomed to speaking and hadn’t been for a long time.

“Aye, she seen ’em alright,” Bane said, mouth set in a grim line. “Prolly one o’ you wenches that lured em’ here.”

The matron kept smiling. Her hands trembled. “Our husbands will be home anon. Mayhap they have seen your companions.” She turned and walked into the longhouse. The door closed and then came the unmistakable clunk of a bar dropping.

Bane shook his head and spat. He broke apart his Rigby and checked the load and clacked the breech into place again.

"Well, this ain't good," Stevens said.

Horn said, "What we aimin' to do?" He moved to shuck his pack and Ruark frowned and told him to leave it be.

"Gonna find Cal and Ma. That's what. And leave your goddamned pack on. We have to make tracks in a hurry you wanna be all the way up shit crick with no paddle?" Stevens clapped his hat on. "Stick our noses in every last house. Kick in the doors if we have to. Let's make it quick. Daylight is burnin'."

Miller and Bane teamed to search the cottages on the south side; Stevens, Horn, and Ruark took the north. It went fast. Miller took the lead, busting through the doors and making a brief sweep of the interiors. The women inside calmly waited, speaking not a word to the trespassers—and indeed, many were pregnant. Each house was small and dim, but there weren't many places to hide. Most were neat and well-ordered, not untoward in any obvious way. Simple furnishings, albeit archaic. Oil lamps and candles, fireplaces that doubled as ovens. A paltry selection of books on rude shelves. This last detail struck him as truly odd.

He said to Bane, "Not one Bible. You ever see this many houses without a copy or two of the good book lying around?" Bane shrugged and allowed as he hadn't witnessed that particular phenomenon either.

Both parties finished within a few minutes and regrouped in the square. Everyone was sweating from running up the hill to check the half dozen houses perched there. Miller mentioned the lack of holy literature. Stevens said, "Yeh, mighty peculiar. Where are the kids? You seen any?"

"Gudamn!" Horn said. "Brats should be crawlin' underfoot, chasin' the chickens, screamin' bloody murder. Somethin' shore as hell ain't right."

"Mebbe they inside the big house," Ruark said. "Or that tower."

"Well, we gotta check that house," Miller said although the idea made him unhappy. The thought of searching the tower was even worse—it curved out of joint, angles distorted, and the sight made his head queer, his stomach ill. Not the tower if there were any other way.

Horn appeared stricken. “Hold on there, fellas. Them women ain’t gonna hold Cal or Ma. No sir. We barge in there an’ git shot, some might say we had it comin’.”

“Yeh, I reckon,” Stevens said. “You can stay out here and keep watch if you’re afraid of the ladies. Them husbands gonna be walkin’ in on us any minute. Who knows how many of them old boys’ll show.”

“Plenty, you kin wager,” Bane said.

Miller kicked the door. “Solid as a stump,” he said. Ruark spat and unlimbered his axe, as did Bane a moment later. The pair stood shoulder to shoulder chopping at the door and it crashed inward after a few blows. The men piled into the house, blinking against the smoky dimness. The sole light came from what seeped through window notches and a guttering fire in the hearth. The murk made hazy blobs of the long table, the counter and barrels stacked in threes here and there. The peak roof vaulted to a height of fifteen or so feet, supported by a massive center beam and a series of angled joists that met the wall at about chin level. Meat hooks, pots and pans, coils of rope, cured ham, and strings of sausage swayed and rustled with each gentle exhalation from the hearth.

Of the women there was no sign, but Ma was present.

Miller almost cried out when he beheld what had been done to the Welshman, and Stevens hollered loud enough to bust an eardrum. Miller didn’t blame him. Ma sat Indian style, naked in the middle of the floor, blood thick as pudding around his legs, in his lap. His belly was sliced wide and a quivering rope of purple innards was strung several feet above him and looped through a large eyebolt suspended from a chain. The intestines traveled down again like a pulley cable and wrapped around a wooden turnstile. The turnstile had been cranked repeatedly and its gory yarn oozed and leaked. Most of the rest of Ma’s guts were slopped across his thighs, or floating in the grue. His slack jaw drooled. He gave his comrades a glassy eyed nod not much different than his usual.

“Oh, god, Ma!” Stevens said. “What’d they do to you, hoss?”

Horn stuck his head in to see what the commotion was all about and shrieked to beat the band, so Ruark swatted him with his hat and drove him outside. Right then the matron ghosted from the gloom in the corner and

hacked Bane's shoulder with a cleaver. He yelled and smacked her in the jaw with the butt of his Rigby and she sprawled.

Blood trickled from the matron's lips. The injury did not diminish her, rather imbued her with an aura of savagery and mania that caused the men to flinch as one might from a wounded beast. Her eyes were so very large and dark and they gleamed with tears of rage and exultation. She whispered with the intimacy of a lover, "Did ye see what's waiting for ye in the trees?"

"Where's our other man?" Miller strode over to the matron and leveled his rifle at her. "I'll blow a damned hole in your kneecap, Missus. See if I won't."

"No need for that. The handsome lad is in the tower. They gave us the fat one for sport. It amuses them to watch us practice cruelty."

Miller walked around Ma and the coagulating lake of blood. He grasped the ring of a trapdoor and pulled. Several of the women were huddled like goats in a root cellar. They gasped and held each other.

"See him?" Stevens said.

Miller slammed the trapdoor and shook his head.

Bane cussed as Ruark pulled the cleaver free of his shoulder with a gristly crunch. Miller fashioned a tourniquet. The entire left side of Bane's buckskin jacket was soaked through and dripping. Horn shouted. Everyone ran to the windows. Twilight lay upon the world and a disjointed chain of lamps bobbed in the purple dark, descending the switchback trail on the other side of the valley. Miller said, "Either we fort up, or we run for it."

Stevens said, "Trapped like rats in here. Roof is made of wood. They could burn us alive."

"Not with they women in here," Bane said through gritted teeth.

"You want to spend the night in here with them?" Miller said.

"Yeh, never mind."

"We could take this one as a hostage," Stevens said halfheartedly.

"Piss on that," Miller said. "Who knows what she'll chop off next time."

"Ye should flee into the hills," the matron said. "The horrors ye will soon meet… flee, good hunters. Or make an end of each other with your guns

and knives. T’will be a merciful death in comparison.”

“Shut up before I kill you,” Miller said. The matron stopped talking at once.

“What about Ma?” Stevens said.

“He’s gone,” Bane said. “Worst way a man kin go. Gutted like a pig.”

“We cain’t leave him.”

“Naw, we cain’t.” Ruark drew his flintlock pistol. He walked over and laid the barrel against the back of Ma’s head and squeezed the trigger. For Miller, in that moment the past five years of his life were erased and he side slipped through time and space into a muddy trench in France, shells and bodies exploding. He had never left, never escaped.

Stevens aimed his rifle at the matron. He lowered it. “Don’t have the sand to shoot no woman. Let’s git, boys.”

Ruark said, “Won’t make it far in these woods in the dark.”

Stevens said, “We head for the tower and fetch Cal. See what happens.”

The Matron said, “Yes! Yes! Go into the house of the Master! He’ll greet ye with a glad smile and open arms!”

“Quiet yerself, hag,” Stevens said, menacing her with his rifle butt. “C’mon, boys. Let’s find poor Cal before the villains make stew of him.” There was grudging acquiescence to this plan and the men withdrew from the longhouse and its horrors.

Miller went to the palisade gate and shouldered the Enfield, aimed at the string of lights and blasted several rounds in rapid succession. One of the approaching lamps burst, the rest were doused momentarily. A howl of pain rose from the field. Miller reloaded in a hurry. He ran for the tower where his companions were gathered near its double doors. Something fluttered to his left—a coat tail disappearing behind a pile of neatly stacked firewood. He knew they’d been had. While the villagers waving lanterns on the flats played decoy, others had crept along in a flanking action. He dropped to a knee and swung his rifle around.

“Ambush!” Bane hollered as a dozen or more men in coats and top hats sprang from behind sheds, cottages, hay bales, seemingly everywhere. Pitchforks, hatchets, and knives, edges gleaming and glinting; a couple

carried blunderbusses, bulkier and older than even Ruark's. Those guns cracked and spat fire. Puffs of sulfurous white smoke boiled and seethed.

Ten feet away Bane let loose both barrels of the Rigby with a clap of thunder that sounded as if Archangel Michael himself had descended from Heaven to smite the good Lord's enemies. The muzzle flash lit up the tower courtyard like a rocket explosion. A villager was cut in half and a section of the cottage wall behind him caved in, stomped by an elephant. The other loggers loosed a fusillade in a murderous fireworks display.

Night vision spoiled by the alternating glare and shadow, Miller struggled to find targets. He didn't have the opportunity to draw a bead, but simply emptied the Enfield as fast as he could work the bolt. Most of his bullets clattered off stone or ripped furrows into the earth. However, he shot one bearded brute between the eyes as the man charged with an upraised hatchet, and drilled another in the back as the fellow stood motionless as if uncertain how to join the fray.

The cottage that Bane had perforated with his gun caught fire. Flames leaped into the sky. Glass tinkled as it fractured. The fire spread to another house, then another, and in less than thirty seconds, the combatants were struggling by the red blaze of a circle in hell. Ruark swung his axe and lopped a villager's head. The head floated past Miller and into the blaze. Bane screamed and laughed, his beard splattered with blood. He pressed a man's face against a flaming timber and held it there until flesh popped and sizzled. Horn dropped his rifle and turned to run. An older gent in a stovepipe hat knocked him down and skewered him with a pitchfork. The pitchfork went in with a meaty thunk and a clink as the tines bit through into the dirt. Horn grabbed the handle and wrestled for dear life and the man grunted, planted his boot against Horn's groin, and pried loose the pitchfork and raised it to stick him again. Then Ruark's axe whapped the back of the villager's skull and turned it to jelly and the man collapsed facedown, legs twitching. Stevens' rifle boomed once, twice, and he cursed and drew a knife and sidled in tight with his companions. Miller was empty. He picked up a severed hand and forearm and threw it in a man's face then shoulder-blocked him to the ground and methodically clubbed him to death with his rifle butt. Sweat and grease and flying drops of blood soaked him. Miller's arms were weak and he could scarcely raise them at the end. A blast of heat

from the burning houses seared his cheeks and ignited the tips of his hair. The smell of roasting flesh was strong.

The remaining villagers routed, fleeing through the flames and the rolling black smoke. Bane, still braying mad laughter, chucked a tomahawk. It sank into a man's backside. The man yelped and stumbled. Bane whooped and said, "Run, ya fuckin' dogs!" And he barked.

"There's reinforcements yonder!" Stevens and Ruark grasped Horn under the arms and dragged him to his feet. The lad gasped and fainted.

Rifles thundered near the front gate. A musket ball kicked dirt near Miller's foot."

"Follow me, boys!" He led the charge up the hill and into the cave along a twisting path illuminated by the hellish conflagration. Storming the tower was out of the question—he suspected it would burn to the ground soon enough. Regardless, anyone trapped inside would be smoked out or broiled alive.

The cave mouth opened into a low-ceilinged area with a sandy floor and natural outcroppings that served as adequate cover. The men quickly repurposed empty barrels and busted timbers to fashion a makeshift barricade at the entrance. After they'd finished effecting hasty fortifications, Stevens passed around the remnants of his bottle. He said, "We're in it deep. Killed us a few, but I count twenty, maybe more. Prolly mad as hornets over what we done."

"Learn us somethin' we don't know, boy," Bane said. Between blood loss and one too many belts of rotgut to kill the pain, he slurred, listing precariously until Ruark helped him sit against the wall.

Below, several houses were utterly consumed in the inferno and the fire made a sound like rushing wind. Sparks ignited the lower branches of nearby trees. The smoke had become so thick it proved difficult to discern the movements of the villagers. Men darted about with buckets, presumably hurling dirt and water on the flames. Miller went flat and laid the Enfield across his rolled jacket. He waited, inhaled, partially exhaled, and squeezed the trigger. A lucky shot—a villager's arms flew from his sides and he toppled and lay in the dirt, one hand extended into a burning pile of wood,

and soon his clothes smoked and flames licked over them. The rest of the villagers made themselves scarce. The fire spread swiftly after that.

Horn moaned and twisted on the ground. He prayed for Jesus, Mary, and God. Miller helped Ruark peel aside the boy's shirt and slid his hand under his body and felt around. The tines had indeed gone clean through and Horn leaked like a sieve. It wouldn't be long. He caught Ruark's glance and shook his head slightly. Ruark spat. "Boy didn't even fire that peashooter o' his. Bastards."

Horn cried for his mama.

"Hush," Stevens said, striking a match and lighting a lamp he'd found on a peg. He hung the lamp from a support timber in the back of the cave where it constricted to a narrow passage that descended into absolute darkness. Miller couldn't determine the purpose of the cave; although moderately carved and shored, it wasn't a mine. Occult symbols had been chalked upon the walls. Stick figures bowed and scraped, dwarfed by what appeared to be a huge bundle of twigs. Not twigs—worms, or something squiggly like worms.

Huddled around the lamp, the loggers resembled characters from some gothic fable; resurrection men leaning on spades at midnight in a swampy graveyard. By that primitive oil lamplight, the company was a horrific, blood-soaked mess. They piled their packs and sundries in the middle of the floor and counted ammunition and rations. Wounds were appraised: Bane's hacked shoulder would be the death of him without medicine. Ruark had gotten hit in the belly; the hole was about the size of a bean and welled purple and it bubbled when he took a breath. The black powder ball was still inside, although the old logger shrugged and spat and said he felt fine as frog's hair. Stevens revealed nasty punctures in his thigh and ribs, a vicious slash across his breast. Only Miller had survived the melee unscathed.

"What? None of that blood you're covered in is yours? Not even a scratch, you lucky bastard!" Stevens threw back his head and laughed as Ruark helped wind strips of cloth around his torso to staunch the bleeding.

Miller didn't say anything. He'd never taken more than a few bumps and bruises, the occasional cut from flying shrapnel, during the war, had

literally walked through the apocalypse at Belleau Wood untouched.

Stevens made a firepot by slathering bear grease in a tin cup and lighting a strip of cloth for a wick. He and Ruark proposed to scout the tunnel and make certain nobody was sneaking along their back-trail. That left Miller with the kid, who was unconscious and raving, and Bane, who appeared to also have one foot in the grave.

The wait proved short, however. Stevens and Bane reappeared, wide-eyed as horses who'd been spooked by fire. Ruark tossed loose timber and small rocks in the tunnel opening. Stevens reported that the caves stretched on and on, and branched every few paces. In his estimation, anybody damn fool enough to venture into that labyrinth would be wandering for eternity.

After a long, whispered conference, it was decided the men would wait until daylight and then make a run for Slango. There was no telling when or if McGrath might deign to send a search party, so it was safest to assume they were on their own. Watches were set with Ruark taking the first as he allowed he couldn't sleep anyhow. He snuffed the lamp and the firepot and they settled in to wait.

Stevens said, "Ever wonder what Rumpelstiltskin wanted with a kid?"

Miller pulled his hat down and tried to relax. An eldritch white radiance illuminated the cave and it was just him and Horn; everyone else melted and vanished. Mist flowed from the passage and curled over the pile of packs, swirled over Horn's chest and around Miller's knees. Horn stared. His face was gray, suspended in the mist. He said, "C'mon, tell me true. What'd y'all see in that tree? What was hidin' up in there?"

"Worms," Miller said. He wasn't certain if this was accurate. The memory slipped and slithered and changed when he tried to examine it closely. A fibrous network of slimy roots, or worms, or a mass of tendrils squirming in the moist dark of the mighty cedar bole. "They had faces." *Demons sleep in holes in the ground. Live in the rocks, sleep inside a big ol' trees in the deep forest where the sun don't never shine.*

"Oh." Horn nodded. "I dunno what the little man in the story wanted with the child, but I kin tell ya the villagers give their babies to their friends inside the trees… inside this mountain. The sons an' daughters of Ol' Leech. An' I kin tell ya what the people of Ol' Leech do with 'em."

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Jist shut yer eyes an’ look inside. We so close, ya kin see their god. He’s sleepy like a bear in winter. Dreamin’ of his people. Dreamin’ of us here in the daylight, too. But he’s wakin’ up. Be creepin’ out a his den pretty soon, I reckon.”

“Save it, kid.”

“He loves his people. Loves us too, in a different way.” Horn’s smile was shrewd and cruel. He opened his mouth and inhaled the peculiar light and Miller’s dreams became confused. He dreamt of falling through the mountain, through the entire Earth, and into the sky, accelerating like a bullet until the light of the sun dwindled to a pinprick. He crashed through the icy, blood-black surface of a strange moon and drifted weightless in its hollow core. The cavern was rank and humid and dark as pitch. He floated over crags and canyons and forests of clabbered flesh and fungus, his body carried upon the updrafts of a warm, gelatinous sea. At the center of this sea a mountain range shuddered and stirred. The colossus writhed and uncoiled with satanic majesty, aroused by the whine of flea wings. It whispered to him.

Miller awoke to Calhoun begging for help.

Calhoun cried from the direction of the tower. He called them by name in a tone of anguish and his voice carried. He began screaming the screams of a man partially buried alive or hung in barbed wire or swollen with mustard gas. Miller lay in the shadows, watching the dying light of the fires shiver across the wall of the cave. Calhoun kept screaming and they all pretended not to hear him.

Still later and after night settled in as tight as a blindfold, Stevens shook Miller. “Somethin’s wrong.”

“Oh, jumpin’ Jaysus,” Ruark said and moments later lighted the firepot. Miller would’ve cursed the old man for revealing their position, except he saw the cause of alarm—Horn was gone, spirited away from under their

noses. Drips and drabs of blood smeared into the tunnel, into the blackness. “Them sonsabitches snatched Thad!”

As if in response to the light, a faint, ghostly moan echoed up the passage from great subterranean depths. *Help me, boys. Help me.* At least that’s what it sounded like to Miller. The distance and acoustics could’ve made wind whistling through chimneys of rock resemble almost anything.

“Lordy, Lordy,” Bane said. He was a frightful sight; gore limed his beard and jacket. He might’ve been a talking corpse. “That’s the boy.”

“Ain’t him,” Stevens said.

“The kid is done for,” Miller said. His eyes watered and he struggled to keep his voice even. “Whoever’s hooting down that tunnel is no friend of ours.”

“They’s right, Moses,” Ruark said. “This an ol’ Injun trick. Make a noise of a wounded friend an draw ya in.” He ran his thumb across his throat with an exaggerated flourish. “Ya should know it, hoss. That boy is daid.”

“Lookit all the blood,” Stevens said.

Bane shoved a plug of tobacco into his mouth and chewed with his eyes closed. His flesh was papery and his eyelids fluttered the way a man’s do when he’s caught in a terrible dream. He resembled the photographs of dead outlaws in open coffins displayed on frontier boardwalks. He spat. “Yeh, an’ lookit me. Still kickin’.”

Help me. Help me. The four of them froze like woodland animals, heads inclined toward the dim cries, the cold, cold draft.

“Ain’t him,” Stevens repeated, but mostly to himself.

Bane stood. He leaned against the wall, the barrel of his Rigby nosing the sand. He nodded to Ruark. “You comin’?”

Ruark spat. He lifted the firepot and led the way.

Bane said, “Alrightee, boys. Take care.” He tapped his hat and limped after his comrade. Their shadows swayed and jostled, and their light grew smaller and seeped into the mountain and was gone.

The others sat in the dark for a long time, listening. Miller heard faint laughter, a snatch of Bane singing “John Brown’s Body,” and then only the

fluting of the wind in the rocks.

"Oh, hell," Stevens said when the silence between them had gone on for an age. "You was in the war."

"You weren't?"

"Uh-uh. My father worked for the post office. He fixed my card so's I wouldn't get conscripted."

"Wish I'd thought of that," Miller said.

"You seen the worst of it. Any chance we kin get out a this with our skins?"

"Nope."

There was another long pause. Stevens said, "Want a smoke?" He lighted two Old Mills and passed one to Miller. They smoked and listened, but there was nothing to hear except for the wind, the rustle of branches outside. Stevens said, "He weren't dragged. The kid crawled away."

"How do you figure? He was pretty much dead."

"*Pretty much* ain't the same thing, now is it? I heard 'em talkin' to him, whisperin' from the dark. Only heard bits. Didn't need more… they told him to come ahead. An' he did."

"Must've been persuasive," Miller said. "And you didn't raise the alarm."

"Hard to explain. Snake-bit, frozen stiff. It was like my body fell asleep yet I could hear what was goin' on. I was piss-scared."

Miller smoked his cigarette. "I don't blame you," he said.

"I got my senses back after a piece. Kid was long gone by then. Whoever they are, he went with 'em."

"And now Moses and Ruark are with them too."

"I didn't tell the whole truth about what we saw in the tunnel."

"Is that so."

"Didn't seem much point carryin' on. Not far along the trail it opens into a cavern. Dunno how big; our light couldn't touch but the edges of the walls and the ceilin'. There were drops into plain ol' nothin' an' more passages twistin' every which way. But we stopped only a few steps into the cavern. A pillar rose high as the light could reach. Broad at the base like a pyramid

and made of rocks all slippery an' shiny from drippin' water. Except, the rocks weren't just rocks. There were skeletons cemented in between. Prolly hundreds an' hundreds. Small things. There was a hole at eye level. Smooth as the bore of my gun and about the size of my fist. Pure black, solid, glistenin' black that threw the light from our torch back at us. We didn't peep too close on account of the skeletons before we turned tail and ran. Saw one thing as we turned to haul our asses… That hole had widened enough I could a jumped in and stood tall. It made a sound that traveled from somewhere farther and deeper than I want a think about. Not the kind a sound you hear, but the kind you feel in your bones. Felt kinda bad and good at once. I could tell Ruark liked it. Oh, he was afraid, but compelled, I guess you'd say."

"Well," Miller said after consideration, "I can see why you might've kept that to yourself."

"Yeh. I wish them ol' coons had stayed back. Maybe we could a blasted our way out with their guns and ours."

Miller didn't think so. "Maybe. Catch some shut eye. Sunup in a couple hours."

Stevens rolled over and set his hat over his face and didn't move again. Miller watched the stars fade.

They left the cave at dawn and descended the hill into the ruins of the village. Ashes turned in the breeze. The tower stood, although scorched and blackened. Its double doors were sprung, wood smoldering, hinges melted. Smoke curled from the gap. Many of the surrounding houses had burned to their foundations. Gray dust lay over everything. Corpses were stacked near the longhouse and covered with a canvas tarp to keep the birds away. Judging from height and width of the collection, at least fifteen bodies were piled beneath the tarp awaiting burial. Twenty-five to thirty men and women combed the charred wreckage. Their hands and faces were filthy with the gray dust. Some stared hatefully at the pair, but none spoke, none raised a hand.

Miller and Stevens trudged through the village and onward, following the river south as it wended through the valley. With every step, Miller's shoulders tightened as he awaited the inevitable musket ball to shear his spine. Early in the afternoon, they climbed a bluff and rested for the first time.

After Stevens caught his breath, he said, "I don't understand. Why they'd let us live?" He removed his hat and peered through the trees, searching for signs of pursuit.

"Did they?" Miller said. He didn't look the way they'd come, instead studying the forest depths before them, tasting the damp and the rot and the cold. He thought of his dream of flying into the depths of space, of the terrible darkness between the stars and what ruled there. "We've got nowhere to hide. I had to guess, I'd guess they're saving us for something very special."

So, they continued on and arrived at the outskirts of Slango as the peaks darkened to purple. Nothing remained of the encampment except for abandoned logs and mucky, flattened areas, and a muddle of footprints and drag marks. Every man, woman, and mule was gone. Every piece of equipment likewise vanished. The railroad tracks had been torn up. In a few months forest would reclaim all but the shorn slopes, erasing any evidence Slango Camp ever stood there.

"Shit," Stevens said without much emotion. He hung his hat on a branch and wiped his face with a bandanna.

"Hello, lads," A man said, stepping from behind a tree. He was wide and portly and wore a stovepipe hat and an immaculate silk suit. His handlebar mustache was luxuriously waxed and he carried a blackthorn cane in his left hand. A dying ray of sun glowed upon the white, white skin of his face and neck. "I am Dr. Boris Kalamov. You have caused me a tremendous amount of trouble." He gestured at the surroundings. "This is not our way. We prefer peaceful coexistence, to remain unseen and unheard, suckling like a hagfish, our hosts none the wiser, albeit dimly cognizant through the persistent legends and campfire tales which please us and nourish us as much as blood and bone. To act with such dramatic flourish goes against our code, our very nature. Alas, certain of my brethren were taken by a

vengeful mood what with you torching the village of our servants.” He *tisked* and wagged a finger that seemed to possess too many joints.

Miller didn’t even bother to lift his rifle. He was focused upon the nightmare taking shape in his mind. “How now, Doctor?”

Stevens was more optimistic, or just doggedly belligerent. He jacked a round into the chamber of his Winchester and sighted the man’s chest.

Dr. Kalamov smiled and his mouth dripped black. “You arrived at a poor time, friends. The black of the sun, the villagers’ holiest of holy days when they venerate the Great Dark and we who call it home. Their quaint and superstitious ceremony at the dolmen cut short because of your trespass. Such an interruption merits pain and suffering. O’ Men from Porlock, it shan’t end well for you.”

Stevens glanced around, peering into the shadows of the trees. “I figured you didn’t come for tea, fancy pants. What I want a know is what happens next.”

“You will dwell among my people, of course.”

“Where? You mean in the village?”

“No, oh, no, no, not the village with y*our* kind, the cattle who breed our delicacies and delights. No, you shall dwell in the Dark with *us*. Where the rest of your friends from this lovely community were taken last night while you two cowered in the cave. You’re a wily and resourceful fellow, Mr. Stevens, as are most of your doughty woodsmen kin. We can make use of you. Wonderful, wonderful use.”

“Goodbye, you sonofabitch,” Stevens said, cocking the hammer.

“Not quite,” Dr. Kalamov said. “If we can’t have you, we’ll simply make do with your relatives. Your father still works for the post office in Seattle, does he not? And your sweet mother knits and has supper ready when he gets home to that cozy farmhouse you grew up in near Green Lake. Your little brother Buddy working on the railroad in Nevada. Your nephews Curtis and Kevin are riding the range in Wyoming. So many miles of fence to mend, so little time. Very dark on the prairie at night. Perhaps you would rather we visit them instead.”

Stevens lowered his rifle, then dropped it in the mud. He walked to the doctor and stood beside him, slumped and defeated. Dr. Kalamov patted his head. The doctor's hand was large enough to have encompassed it if he'd wished, and his nails were as long as darning needles. He flicked Stevens' ear and it peeled loose and plopped wetly in the bushes. Stevens clapped his hand over the hole and screamed and fell to his knees, blood streaming between his fingers. Dr. Kalamov smiled an avuncular smile and tousled the man's hair. He pushed a nail through the top of Stevens' skull and wiggled. Stevens fell silent, his face slack and dumb as Ma's had ever been.

"Reckon I'll decline your offer," Miller said. He drew his pistol and weighed it in his hand. "Go ahead and terrorize my distant relations. Meanwhile, I think I'll blow my brains out and be shut of this whole mess."

"Don't be hasty, young man," Dr. Kalamov said. "I've taken a shine to you. You're free to leave this mountain. There's a lockbox in the roots of that tree. The company payroll. Take it, take a new name. And when you're old, be certain to tell of the horrors that you've seen… horrors that will infest your dreams from today until the day you die. We'll always be near you, Mr. Miller." He doffed his hat and bowed. Then he grasped Stevens by the collar and bundled him under one arm and into the gathering gloom.

The lockbox was where the man had promised and it contained a princely sum. Miller stuffed the money in a sack as the sun went down and darkness fell. When he'd finished packing the money he buried his head in his arms and groaned.

"By the way, there are two minor conditions," Dr. Kalamov said, leering from behind a stump. The flesh of his face hung loose as if it were a badly slipping mask. His eyes were misaligned, his mouth a bleeding black slash that extended to his ears. He had no teeth. "You're a virile lad. Be certain to spawn oodles and oodles of babies—I must insist on that point. We'll be observing, so do your best, my boy. There is also the matter of your firstborn…"

Miller had nearly pissed himself at Dr. Kalamov's reappearance. He forced his throat to work. "You're asking for my child."

Dr. Kalamov chuckled and drummed his claws on the wood. "No, Mr. Miller. I jest. Although, those wicked old fairytales are jolly good fun,

speaking such primordial truths as they do. Be well, be fruitful.” He scuttled backward and then lifted vertically into the shadows, a spider ascending its thread, and was gone.

Years later, Miller married a girl from California and settled in a small farming town. He worked as a gunsmith. His wife gave birth to a boy. After the baby arrived he’d often lie awake at night and listen to the house settle and the mice scratch in the cupboards. When the baby cried, Miller’s wife would go into the nursery and soothe him with a lullaby. Miller strained to hear the words, for it was the deep silences that unnerved him and caused his heart to race.

There was a willow tree in the yard. It cast a shadow through the window. As his wife crooned to the baby in the nursery, Miller watched the shadow branches ripple upon the dull white oval of wall. On the bad nights, the branches twitched and narrowed and writhed like tendrils worming their way through fissures in the plaster toward the bed and his sweating, paralyzed form.

One morning he went to the shed and fetched an axe and chopped the tree down. The first tree he’d felled since his youth. The willow was very old and very large and the job lasted until lunchtime.

The center was semi-rotten and hollow, and when the tree crashed to earth the bole partially split and gushed pulp. Something heavy and multisegmented shifted and retracted inside the trunk. Water gurgled from the wound with a wheeze that almost sounded like someone muttering his name. He dumped kerosene over everything and struck a match. The neighbors gathered and watched the blaze, and though they gossiped amongst themselves, no one said a word to him. There’d been rumors.

His wife came to the door with the baby in her arms. Her expression was that of a person who’d witnessed a dark miracle and knew not how to reconcile the fear and wonder of the revelation.

Miller stood in the billowing smoke, leaning on his axe, eyes reflecting the lights of hell.

Hand Of Glory

This version taken from *The Beautiful Thing That Awaits Us All and Other Stories*, 2013

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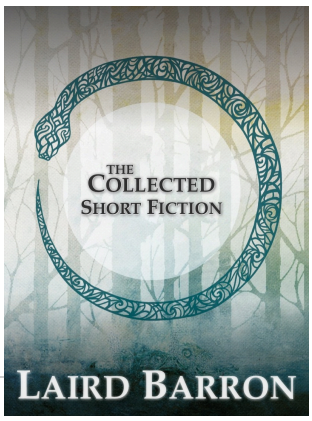


From the pages of a partially burned manuscript discovered in the charred ruins of a mansion in Ransom Hollow, Washington:

> That buffalo charges across the eternal prairie, mad black eye rolling at the photographer. The photographer is Old Scratch's left hand man. Every few seconds the buffalo rumbles past the same tussock, the same tumbleweed, the same bleached skull of its brother or sister. That poor buffalo is Sisyphus without the stone, without the hill, without a larger sense of futility. The beast's hooves are worn to bone. Blood foams at its muzzle. The dumb brute doesn't understand where we are.
>
> But I do.
>
> —CP, Nov. 1925

This is the house my father built stone by stone in Anno Domini 1898. I was seven. Mother died of consumption that winter, and my baby brothers Earl and William followed her through the Pearly Gates directly. Hell of a housewarming.

Dad never remarried. He just dug in and redoubled his efforts on behalf of his boss, Myron Arden. The Arden family own the politicos, the cops, the stevedores and the stevedores' dogs. They owned Dad too, but he didn't mind. Four bullets through the chest, a knife in the gut, two car wrecks, and a bottle a day booze habit weren't enough to rub him out. It required a broken heart from missing his wife. He collapsed, stone dead, on a job in

Seattle in 1916 and I inherited his worldly possessions, such as they were. The debts, too.

The passing of Donald Cope was a mournful day commemorated with a crowded wake—mostly populated by Mr. Myron Arden's family and henchmen who constituted Dad's only real friends—and the requisite violins, excessive drinking of Jameson's, fistfights, and drunken profanities roared at passersby, although in truth, there hadn't been much left of the old man since Mother went.

My sister Lucy returned to Ireland and joined a convent. Big brother Acton lives here in Olympia. He's a surgeon. When his friends and associates ask about his kin at garden parties, I don't think my name comes up much. That's okay. Dad always liked me better.

I've a reputation in this town. I've let my share of blood, taken my share of scalps. You want an enemy bled, burnt, blasted into Kingdom Come, ask for Johnny Cope. My viciousness and cruelty are without peer. There are bad men in this business, and worse men, and then there's me. But I must admit, any lug who quakes in his boots at the mention of my name should've gotten a load of the old man. *There* was Mr. Death's blue-eyed boy himself, like Mr. Cummings said.

A dark hallway parallels the bedroom. Dad was a short, wiry man from short wiry stock and he fitted the house accordingly. The walls are close, the windows narrow, and so the passage is dim even in daylight. When night falls it becomes a mineshaft and I lie awake, listening. Listening for a voice in the darkness, a dragging footstep, or something else, possibly something I've not heard in this life. Perversely, the light from the lamp down the street, or the moonlight, or the starlight, make that black gap of a bedroom door a deeper mystery.

I resemble Mother's people: lanky, with a horse's jaw and rawboned hands meant for spadework, or tying nooses on ropes, and I have to duck when passing through these low doorways; but at heart, I'm my father's son. I knock down the better portion of a bottle of Bushmill's every evening while I count my wins and losses from the track. My closet is stacked with crates

of the stuff. I don’t pay for liquor—it’s a bequest from Mr. Arden, that first class bootlegger; a mark of sentimental appreciation for my father’s steadfast service to the cause. When I sleep, I sleep fully dressed, suit and tie, left hand draped across the Thompson like a lover. Fear is a second heartbeat, my following shadow.

This has gone on a while.

The first time I got shot was in the fall of 1914.

I was twenty-one and freshly escaped from the private academy Dad spent the last of his money shipping me off to. He loved me so much he’d hoped I wouldn’t come back, that I’d join Acton in medicine, or get into engineering, or stow away on a tramp steamer and spend my life hunting ivory and drinking and whoring my way across the globe into Terra Incognita; anything but the family business. No such luck. My grades were pathetic, barely sufficient to graduate as I’d spent too many study nights gambling, and weekends fighting sailors at the docks. I wasn’t as smart as Acton anyway, and I found it much easier and more satisfying to break things rather than build them. Mine was a talent for reading and leading people. I didn’t mind manipulating them, I didn’t mind destroying them if it came to that. It’s not as if we dealt with real folks, anyway. In our world, everybody was part of the machine.

Dad had been teaching me the trade for a few months, taking me along on lightweight jobs. There was this Guinea named Alfonso who owed Mr. Arden big and skipped town on the debt. Dad and I tracked the fellow to Vancouver and caught him late one night, dead drunk in his shack. Alfonso didn’t have the money, but we knew his relatives were good for it, so we only roughed him up: knocked some teeth loose and broke his leg. Dad used a mattock handle with a bunch of bolts drilled into the fat end. It required more swings than I’d expected.

Unfortunately, Alfonso was entertaining a couple of whores from the dance hall. The girls thought we were murdering the poor bastard and that they’d be next. One jumped through a window, and the other, a halfnaked, heavyset lass who was in no shape to run anywhere, pulled a derringer from

her brassiere and popped me in the ribs. Probably aiming for my face. Dad didn't stop to think about the gun being a one-shot rig—he took three strides and whacked her in the back of the head with the mattock handle. Just as thick-skulled as Alfonso, she didn't die, although that was a pity, considering the results. One of her eyes fell out later and she never talked right again. Life is just one long train wreck.

They say you become a man when you lose your virginity. Not my baptism, alas, alack. Having a lima bean-sized hole blown through me and enduring the fevered hours afterward was the real crucible, the mettletester. I remember sprawling in the front seat of the car near the river and Dad pressing a doubled handkerchief against the wound. Blood dripped shiny on the floorboard. It didn't hurt much, more like the after-effects of a solid punch to the body. However, my vision was too acute, too close; black and white flashes scorched my brain.

Seagulls circled the car, their shadows so much larger than seemed possible, the shadows of angels ready to carry me into Kingdom Come. Dad gave me a dose of whiskey from his hip flask. He drove with the pedal on the floor and that rattletrap car shuddered on the verge of tearing itself apart, yet as I slumped against the door, the landscape lay frozen, immobile as the glacier that ended everything in the world the first time. Bands of light, God's pillars of blazing fire, bisected the scenery into a glaring triptych that shattered my mind. Dad gripped my shoulder and laughed and shook me now and again to keep me from falling unconscious.

Dr. Green, a sawbones on the Arden payroll, fished out the bullet and patched the wound and kept me on ice in the spare room at his house. That's when I discovered I had the recovery power of a brutish animal, a bear that retreats to the cave to lick its wounds before lumbering forth again in short order. To some, such a capacity suggests the lack of a higher degree of acumen, the lack of a fully developed imagination. I'm inured to pain and suffering, and whether it's breeding or nature I don't give a damn.

Two weeks later I was on the mend. To celebrate, I threw Gahan Kirk, a no account lackey for the Eastside crew, off the White Building roof for cheating at cards. Such is the making of a legend. The reality was, I pushed the man while he was distracted with begging Dad and Sonny Hopkins, Mr. Arden's number two enforcer, not to rub him out. Eight stories. He flipped

like a ragdoll, smashing into a couple of fire escapes and crashing one down atop him in the alley. It was hideously spectacular.

The second time I got shot was during the Great War.

Mr. Arden was unhappy to see me sign on for the trip to Europe. He saw I was hell-bent to do my small part and thus gave his reluctant blessing, assuring me I'd have work when I came home from 'Killing the Huns.' Five minutes after I landed in France I was damned sorry for such a foolish impulse toward patriotism.

One night our platoon negotiated a mine field, smashed a machine gun bunker with a volley of pineapples, clambered through barbed wire, and assaulted an enemy trench. Toward the end of the action, me and a squad mate were in hand to hand combat with a German officer we'd cornered. I'd run dry on ammo five minutes before and gone charging like a rhino through the encampment, and thank Holy Mother Mary it was a ghost town from the shelling or else I'd have been ventilated inside of twenty paces. The German rattled off half a dozen rounds with his Luger before I stuck a bayonet through his neck. I didn't realize I was clipped until the sleeve of my uniform went sopping black. Two bullets, spaced tight as a quarter zipped through my left shoulder. Couldn't have asked for a cleaner wound and I hopped back into the fray come the dawn advance. I confiscated the German's pistol and the wicked bayonet he'd kept in his boot. They'd come in handy on many a bloody occasion since.

The third time… we'll get to that.

11/11/25

Autumn of 1925 saw my existence in decline. Then I killed some guys and it was downhill in a wagon with no brakes from there.

Trouble followed after a string of anonymous calls to my home. Heavy breathing and hang-ups. The caller waited until the dead of night when I was drunk and too addled to do more than slur curses into the phone. I figured it was some dame I'd miffed, or a lug I'd thrashed, maybe even somebody with a real grudge—a widow or an orphan. My detractors are many. Whoever it was only spoke once upon the occasion of their final call.

Amid crackling as of a bonfire, the male voice said, “I love you son. I love you son. I love you son.”

I was drunk beyond drunk and I fell on the floor and wept. The calls stopped and I put it out of my mind.

Toward the end of September I hit a jackpot on a twenty to one pony and collected a cool grand at the window, which I used to pay off three markers in one fell swoop. I squandered the remainder on a trip to Seattle, embarking upon a bender that saw me tour every dance hall and speakeasy from the harbor inland. The ride lasted until I awakened flat broke one morning in a swanky penthouse suite of the Wilsonian Hotel in the embrace of an over the hill burlesque dancer named Pearl.

Pearl was statuesque, going to flab in the middle and the ass. Jesus, what an ass it was, though. We’d known one another for a while—I courted her younger sister Madison before she made for the bright lights of ChiTown. Last I heard, she was a gangster’s moll. Roy Night, a button man who rubbed out guys for Capone, could afford to keep Maddie in furs and diamonds and steak dinners. Good for her. Pearl wasn’t any Maddie, but she wasn’t half bad. Just slightly beaten down, a little tired, standing at the crossroads where Maddie herself would be in six or seven years. Me, I’d likely be dead by then so no time like the present.

I was hungover and broke, and with two of my last ten bucks tipped the kid who pushed the breakfast cart. He handed me the fateful telegram, its envelope smudged and mussed. I must’ve paid the kid off pretty well during my stay, because he pocketed the money and said there were a couple of men downstairs asking what room I was in. They’d come around twice the day before, too. Bruisers, he said. Blood in their eyes, he said.

My first suspicion was of T-Men or Pinkertons. I asked him to describe the lugs. He did. I said thanks and told him to relay the gentlemen my room number on the sly and pick up some coin for his trouble. These were no lawmen, rather the opposite; a couple of Johnson brothers. Freelance guns, just like me.

Bobby Dirk and Curtis Bane, The Long and The Short, so-called, and that appellation had nothing to do with their stature, but rather stemmed from an embarrassing incident in a bathhouse.

I'd seen them around over the years, shared a drink or two in passing. Dirk was stoop-shouldered and sallow; Bane was stocky with watery eyes and a receding chin. Snowbirds and sad sack gamblers, both of them, which accounted for their uneven temperament and willingness to stoop to the foulest of deeds. Anybody could've put them on my trail. There were plenty of folks who'd be pleased to pony up the coin if it meant seeing me into a pine box.

While Pearl dressed I drank coffee and watched rain hit the window. Pearl knew the party was over—she'd fished through my wallet enough times. She was a good sport and rubbed my shoulders while I ate cold eggs. She had the grip of a stonemason. "You'd better get along," I said.

"Why's that?" she said.

"Because, in a few minutes a couple of men are probably going to break down the door and try to rub me out," I said, and lighted another cigarette.

She laughed and kissed my ear. "Day in the life of Johnny Cope. See ya around, doll. I'm hotfooting it outta here."

I unsnapped the violin case and leaned it against the closet. I assembled the Thompson on the breakfast table, locking pieces together while I watched the rain and thought about Pearl's ass. When I'd finished, I wiped away the excess cleaning oil with a monogrammed hotel napkin. I sipped the dregs of the coffee and opened a new deck of Lucky Strike and smoked a couple of them. After half an hour and still no visitors, I knotted my tie, slipped my automatic into its shoulder holster and shrugged on my suit jacket, then the greatcoat. Pacific Northwest gloom and rain has always agreed with me. Eight months out of the year I can comfortably wear bulky clothes to hide my weapons. Dad had always insisted on nice suits for work. He claimed Mr. Arden appreciated we dressed as gentlemen.

The hall was dim and I moved quickly to the stairwell exit. Elevators are deathtraps. You'd never catch me in one. I could tell you stories about fools who met their untimely ends like rats in a box. I descended briskly, paused at the door, then stepped into the alley. A cold drizzle misted everything, made the concrete slick and treacherous. I lighted a cigarette and stuck it in the corner of my mouth and began to move for the street.

For a couple of seconds I thought I had it made. Yeah. I always thought that.

Curtis Bane drifted from the inset threshold of a service door about ten feet to the street side. He raised his hand, palm out to forestall me. I wasn't buying. I hurled the empty violin case at his head and whipped around. And yes indeed, that rotten cur Bobby Dirk was sneaking up on my flank. I brought the trench broom from under my coat and squeezed off half the drum, rat-a-tat-tat. Oh, that sweet ratcheting burr; spurts of flame lighted the gloomy alley. Some of the bullets blasted brick from the wall, but enough ripped through a shocked and amazed Bobby Dirk to cut him nearly in half in a gout of black blood and smoke. What remained of him danced, baby, danced and flew backward and fell straight down, all ties to the here and now severed.

Curtis Bane screamed and though I came around fast and fired in the same motion, he'd already pulled a heater and begun pumping metal at me. We both missed and I was empty, that drum clicking uselessly. I went straight at him. Happily, he too was out of bullets and I closed the gap and slammed the butt of the rifle into his chest. Should've knocked him down, but no. The bastard was squat and powerful as a wild animal, thanks to being a coke fiend, no doubt. He ripped the rifle from my grasp and flung it aside. He locked his fists and swung them up into my chin, and it was like getting clobbered with a hammer, and I sprawled into a row of trash cans. Stars zipped through my vision. A leather cosh dropped from his sleeve into his hand and he knew what to do with it all right. He swung it in a short chopping blow at my face and I got my left hand up and the blow snapped my two smallest fingers, and he swung again and I turned my head just enough that it only squashed my ear and you better believe that hurt, but now I'd drawn the sawback bayonet I kept strapped to my hip, a fourteen-inch grooved steel blade with notched and pitted edges—Jesus—fuck who knew how many Yankee boys the Kraut who'd owned it gashed before I did for him—and stabbed it to the guard into Bane's groin. Took a couple of seconds for Bane to register it was curtains. His face whitened and his mouth slackened, breath steaming in the chill, his evil soul coming untethered. He had lots of gold fillings. He lurched away and I clutched his sleeve awkwardly with my broken hand and rose, twisting the handle of the

blade side to side, turning it like a car crank into his guts and bladder, putting my shoulder and hip into it for leverage. He moaned in panic and dropped the cosh and pried at my wrist, but the strength was draining from him and I slammed him against the wall and worked the handle with murderous joy. The cords of his neck went taut and he looked away, as if embarrassed, eyes milky, a doomed petitioner gaping at Hell in all its fiery majesty. I freed the blade with a cork-like pop and blood spurted down his leg in a nice thick stream and he collapsed, folding into himself like a bug does when it dies.

Nobody had stuck their head into the alley to see what all the ruckus was about, nor did I hear sirens yet, so I took a moment to collect the dead men's wallets and light a fresh cigarette. Then I gathered my Thompson and its case and retreated into the hotel stairwell to pack the gun, scrape the blood from my shoes and comb my hair. Composed, I walked out through the lobby and the front door, winking at a rosy-cheeked lass and her wintery dame escort. A tear formed at the corner of my eye.

Two cops rolled up and climbed from their Model T. The taller of the pair barely fit into his uniform. He cradled a shotgun. The other pig carried a Billy club. I smiled at the big one as we passed, eyes level, our shoulders almost brushing, the heavy violin case bumping against my leg, the pistol hidden in the sleeve of my coat, already cocked. My hand burned like fire and I was close to vomiting, and surely the pig saw the gory lump of my ear, the snail-trail of blood streaking my cheek. His piggy little eyes were red and dulled, and I recognized him as a brother in inveterate drunkenness. We all kept walking, violent forces drifting along the razor's edge of an apocalyptic clash. They entered the hotel and I hopped a trolley to the train station. I steamed home to Olympia without incident, except by the time I staggered into the house and fell in a heap on the bed, I was out of my mind with agony and fever.

I didn't realize I'd been shot until waking to find myself lying in a pool of blood. There was a neat hole an inch above my hip. I plugged it with my pinky and went to sleep.

Number three. A banner day. Dad would be so proud.

Dick found me a day and a half later, blood everywhere, like somebody had slaughtered a cow in my bed. Miraculously, the wound had clotted enough to keep me from bleeding out. He took a long look at me (I was partially naked and had somehow gotten hold of a couple of bottles of the Bushmill's, which were empty by this point, although I didn't recall drinking them) and then rang Leroy Bly to come over and help salvage the situation as I was in no condition to assist. I think he was also afraid I might be far enough gone to mistake him for a foe and start shooting or cutting. Later, he explained it was the unpleasant-looking man watching my house from a catbird's seat down the way that gave him pause. The guy screwed when Dick approached him, so there was no telling what his intentions were.

The two of them got me into the tub. Good old Dr. Green swung by with his little black bag of goodies and plucked the bullet from my innards, clucking and muttering as he worked. After stitching me inside and out, he put a cast on my hand, bandaged my ear, and shot enough dope into me to pacify a Clydesdale, then gave me another dose for the fever. The boys settled in to watch over me on account of my helpless condition. They fretted that somebody from Seattle was gunning for payback. News of my rubbing out The Long and Short had gotten around. Two or three of the Seattle bosses were partial to them, so it was reasonable to expect they might take the matter personally.

Dick's full name was Richard Stiff and he'd worked for the railroad since he was a boy, just as his father had before him. He was a thick, jowly lug with forearms as round as my calf. Unloading steel off boxcars all day will do that for a man. He was married and had eleven children—a devout Catholic, my comrade Dick. Mr. Arden used him on occasion when a bit of extra muscle was needed. Dick didn't have the stomach for killing, but was more than happy to give some sorry bugger an oak rubdown if that's what Mr. Arden wanted.

The honest money only went so far. The best story I can tell about him is that when the railroad boys gathered for their union hall meetings roll call was done surname first, thus the man reading off the muster would request "Stiff, Dick" to signal his attendance, this to the inevitable jeers and hoots from the rowdy crowd. As for Leroy Bly, he was a short, handsome middle-

aged Irishman who kept an eye on a couple of local speakeasies for the Arden family and did a bit of enforcement for Arden's bookmakers as well. Not a button man by trade, nonetheless I'd heard he'd blipped off at least two men and left their remains in the high timber west of town. Rumor had it one of the poor saps was the boyfriend of a dame Bly had taken a shine to—so he was a jealous bastard as well. Nice to know as I'd never been above snaking a fella's chickadee if the mood was right.

A week passed in a confusion of *delirium tremens* and plain old delirium. Half dead from blood loss, sure, but it was the withdrawal from life-succoring whiskey and tobacco that threatened to do me in.

Eventually the fever broke. I emerged into the light, growling for breakfast and hooch and a cigarette. Dick said someone from The Broadsword Hotel had called at least a dozen times—wouldn't leave a message, had to speak with me personal like. Meanwhile, Bly informed me that Mr. Arden was quite worried about the untimely deaths of The Long and Short. Dick's suspicions that the powers that be wanted my hide proved accurate. It had come down through the bush telegraph I'd do well to take to the air for a few weeks. Perhaps a holiday in a sunnier clime. Bly set a small butcher paper package on the table. The package contained three hundred dollars of "vacation" money. Bly watched as I stuck the cash into my pocket. He was ostensibly Dick's chum and to a lesser degree mine, however I suspected he'd cheerfully plant an ice pick between my shoulder blades should I defy Mr. Arden's wishes. In fact, I figured the old man had sent him to keep tabs on my activities.

I'd read the name of one Conrad Paxton scribbled on the back of a card in Curtis Bane's wallet, so it seemed possible this mystery man dispatched the pair to blip me. A few subtle inquiries led me to believe my antagonist resided somewhere in Western Washington beyond the principal cities. Since getting shy of Olympia was the order of the day, I'd decided to track Paxton down and pay him a visit. To this effect, would the boys be willing to accompany me for expenses and a few laughs?

Both Dick and Bly agreed, Bly with the proviso he could bring along his nephew Vernon. Yeah, I was in Dutch with Mr. Arden, no question—no way Bly would drop his gig here in town unless it was to spy on me, maybe awaiting the word to blip me off. And young master Vernon, he was a sad

sack gambler and snowbird known for taking any low deed that presented itself, thus I assumed Bly wanted him to tag along as backup when the moment came to slip me the shiv. Mr. Arden was likely assessing my continued value to his family versus the ire of his colleagues in Seattle. There was nothing for it but to lie low for a while and see what was what after the dust settled.

I uncapped a bottle and poured myself the first shot of many to come. I stared into the bottom of the glass. The crystal ball hinted this Conrad Paxton fellow was in for a world of pain.

Later that afternoon I received yet another call from management at the Broadsword Hotel passing along the message that an old friend of my father's, one Helios Augustus, desired my presence after his evening show. I hung up without committing, poured a drink and turned over the possibilities. In the end, I struggled into my best suit and had Dick drive me to the hotel.

The boys smuggled me out the back of the house and through a hole in the fence on the off chance sore friends of The Long and Short might be watching. I wondered who that weird bird lurking down the street represented—a Seattle boss, or Paxton, or even somebody on Arden's payroll, a gun he'd called from out of town? I hated to worry like this; it gave me acid, had me jumping at shadows. Rattle a man enough he's going to make a mistake and get himself clipped.

I came into the performance late and took a seat on the edge of the smoky lounge where I could sag against the wall and ordered a steak sandwich and a glass of milk while the magician did his thing to mild applause.

Helios Augustus had grown a bit long in the tooth, a portly figure dressed in an elegant suit and a cape of darkest purple silk. However, his white hair and craggy features complemented the melodic and cultured timbre of his voice. He'd honed that voice in Shakespearean theatre and claimed descent from a distinguished lineage of Greek poets and prestidigitators. I'd met him at a nightclub in Seattle a couple of years before the Great War. He'd been slimmer and handsomer, and made doves appear and lovely female

assistants disappear in puffs of smoke. Dad took me to watch the show because he'd known Helios Augustus before the magician became famous and was dealing cards on a barge in Port Angeles. Dad told me the fellow wasn't Greek—his real name was Phillip Wary and he'd come from the Midwest, son of a meat packer.

I smoked and waited for the magician to wrap up his routine with a series of elaborate card tricks, all of which required the assistance of a mature lady in a low cut gown and jade necklace, a real duchess. The hand didn't need to be quicker than the eye with that much artfully-lighted bosom to serve as a distraction. As the audience headed for the exits, he saw me and came over and shook my hand. "Johnny Cope in the flesh," he said. "You look like you've been on the wrong end of a stick. I'm sorry about your father." He did not add, *he was a good man*. I appreciated a little honesty, so far as it went. Goodness was not among Dad's virtues. He hadn't even liked to talk about it.

We adjourned to his dressing room where the old fellow produced a bottle of sherry and poured a couple of glasses. His quarters were plush, albeit cramped with his makeup desk and gold-framed mirror, steamer trunks plastered with stamps from exotic ports, a walnut armoire that scraped the ceiling, and shelves of arcane trinkets—bleached skulls and beakers, thick black books and cold braziers. A waxen, emaciated hand, gray as mud and severed at the wrist, jutted from an urn decorated with weird scrollwork like chains of teeny death's heads. The severed hand clutched a black candle. A brass kaleidoscope of particularly ornate make caught my attention. I squinted through the aperture and turned the dial. The metal felt damnably cold. Jigsaw pieces of painted crystal rattled around inside, revealing tantalizing glimpses of naked thighs and breasts, black corsets and red, pouty smiles. The image fell into place and it was no longer a burlesque dancer primping for my pleasure. Instead I beheld a horrid portrait of some rugose beast—all trunk and tentacle and squirming maw. I dropped the kaleidoscope like it was hot.

"Dear lad, you have to turn the opposite direction to focus the naked ladies." Helios Augustus smiled and shook his head at my provincial curiosity. He passed me a cigar, but I'd never acquired a taste for them and stuck with my Lucky Strike. He was in town on business, having relocated

to San Francisco. His fortunes had waned in recent years; the proletariats preferred large stage productions with mirrors and cannon-smoke, acrobats and wild animals to his urbane and intimate style of magic. He lamented the recent deaths of the famed composer Moritz Moszkowski and the Polish novelist Wladislaw Reymont, both of whom he'd briefly entertained during his adventures abroad. Did I, by chance, enjoy classical arts? I confessed my tastes ran more toward Mark Twain and Fletch Henderson and Coleman Hawkins. "Well, big band is a worthy enough pleasure. A certain earthy complexity appropriate to an earthy man. I lived nearly eighteen years on the Continent. Played in the grandest and oldest theatres in Europe. Two shows on the Orient Express. Now I give myself away on a weeknight to faux royalty and well-dressed rabble. Woe is me!" He laughed without much bitterness and poured another drink.

Finally, I said, "What did you call me here to jaw about?"

"Rumor has it Conrad Paxton seeks the pleasure of your company."

"Yeah, that's the name. And let's get it straight—*I'm* looking for *him* with a passion. Who the hell is he?"

"Doubtless you've heard of Eadweard Muybridge, the rather infamous inventor. Muybridge created the first moving picture."

"Dad knew him from the Army. Didn't talk about him much. Muybridge went soft in the head and they parted ways." I had a sip of sherry.

"A brilliant, scandalous figure who was the pet of California high society for many years. He passed away around the turn of the century. Paxton was his estranged son and protege. It's a long story—he put the boy up for adoption; they were later reconciled after a fashion. I met the lad when he debuted from the ether in Seattle as the inheritor of Muybridge's American estate. No one knew that he was actually Muybridge's son at the time. Initially he was widely celebrated as a disciple of Muybridge and a bibliophile specializing in the arcane and the occult, an acquirer of morbid photography and cinema as well. He owns a vault of Muybridge's photographic plates and short films I'm certain many historians would give an eye tooth to examine."

"According to my information, he lives north of here these days," I said.

“He didn’t fare well in California and moved on after the war. Ransom Hollow, a collection of villages near the Cascades. You shot two of his men in Seattle. Quite a rumpus, eh?”

“Maybe they were doing a job for this character, but they weren’t his men. Dirk and Bane are traveling guns.”

“Be that as it may, you would do well to fear Conrad’s intentions.”

“That’s backwards, as I said.”

“So, you *do* mean to track him to ground. Don’t go alone. He’s well-protected. Take some of your meaner hoodlum associates, is my suggestion.”

“What’s his beef? Does he have the curse on me?”

“It seems plausible. He killed your father.”

I nodded and finished my latest round of booze. I set aside the glass and drew my pistol and chambered a round and rested the weapon across my knee, barrel fixed on the magician’s navel. My head was woozy and I wasn’t sure of hitting the side of a barn if push came to shove. “Our palaver has taken a peculiar and unwelcome turn. Please, explain how you’ve come into this bit of news. Quick and to the point is my best advice.”

The magician puffed on his cigar, and regarded me with a half smile that the overly civilized reserve for scofflaws and bounders such as myself. I resisted the temptation to jam a cushion over his face and dust him then and there, because I knew slippery devils like him always came in first and they survived by stepping on the heads of drowning men. He removed the cigar from his mouth and said, “Conrad Paxton confessed it to some associates of mine several years ago.”

“Horse shit.”

“The source is… trustworthy.”

“Dad kicked from a heart attack. Are you saying this lug got to him somehow? Poisoned him?” It was difficult to speak. My vision had narrowed as it did when blood was in my eye. I wanted to strangle, to stab, to empty the Luger. “Did my old man rub out somebody near and dear to Paxton? Thump him one? What?”

“Conrad didn’t specify a method, didn’t express a motive, only that he’d committed the deed.”

“You’ve taken your sweet time reporting the news,” I said.

“The pistol aimed at my John Thomas suggests my caution was well-founded. At the time I didn’t believe the story, thinking Paxton a loudmouthed eccentric. He *is* a loud-mouthed eccentric—I simply thought this more rubbish.”

“I expect bragging of murder is a sure way to spoil a fellow’s reputation in your refined circles.” My collar tightened and my vision was streaky from my elevated pulse, which in turn caused everything on me that was broken, crushed, or punctured to throb. I kept my cool by fantasizing about what I was going to do to my enemy when I tracked him to ground. Better, much better.

“It also didn’t help when the squalid details of Conrad’s provenance and subsequent upbringing eventually came to light. The poor chap was in and out of institutions for most of his youth. He worked as a clerk at (*illegible*) University and there reunited with papa Muybridge and ultimately joined the photographer’s staff. If not for Eadweard Muybridge’s patronage, today Conrad would likely be in a gutter or dead.”

“Oh, I see. Paxton didn’t become a hermit by choice, your people shunned him like the good folks in Utah do it.”

“In a nutshell, yes. Conrad’s childhood history is sufficiently macabre to warrant such treatment. Not much is known about the Paxtons except they owned a fishery. Conrad’s adoptive sister vanished when she was eight and he nine. All fingers pointed to his involvement. At age sixteen he drowned a rival at school and was sent to an asylum until he reached majority. The rich and beautiful are somewhat phobic regarding the criminally insane no matter how affluent the latter might be. Institutional taint isn’t fashionable unless one derives from old money. Alas, Conrad is new money and what he’s got isn’t much by the standards of California high society.”

“I don’t know whether to thank you or shoot you,” I said. “I’m inclined to accept your word for the moment. It would be an unfortunate thing were I to discover this information of yours is a hoax. Who are these associates that heard Paxton’s confession?”

“The Corning Sisters. The sisters dwell in Luster, one of several rustic burghs in Ransom Hollow. If anyone can help you against Conrad, it’ll be the crones. I admired Donald. Your father was a killer with the eye of an artist, the heart of a poet. A conflicted man, but a loyal friend. I’d like to know why Conrad wanted him dead.”

“I’m more interested in discovering why he wants to bop me,” I said. Actually, I was more preoccupied with deciding on a gun or a dull knife.

“He may not necessarily wish to kill you, my boy. It may be worse than that. Do you enjoy films? There’s one that may be of particular importance to you.”

Dick gave me a look when I brought Helios Augustus to the curb. He drove us to the Redfield Museum of Natural History without comment, although Bly’s nephew Vernon frowned and muttered and cast suspicious glances into the rearview. I’d met the lug once at a speakeasy on the south side; lanky kid with red-rimmed eyes and a leaky nose. Pale as milk and mean as a snake. No scholar, either. I smiled at him, though not friendly like.

Helios Augustus rang the doorbell until a pasty clerk who pulled duty as a night watchman and janitor admitted us. The magician held a brief, muttered conference and we were soon guided to the basement archives where the public was never ever allowed. The screening area for visiting big cheeses, donors and dignitaries was located in an isolated region near the boiler room and the heat was oppressive. At least the seats were comfortable old wingbacks and I rested in one while they fussed and bustled around and eventually got the boxy projector rolling. The room was already dim and then Helios Augustus killed the lone floor lamp and we were at the bottom of a mine shaft, except for a blotch of light from the camera aperture spattered against a cloth panel. The clerk cranked dutifully and Helios Augustus settled beside me. He smelled of brandy and dust and when he leaned in to whisper his narration of the film, tiny specks of fire glinted in his irises.

What he showed me was a silent film montage of various projects by Eadweard Muybridge. The first several appeared innocuous—simple

renderings of the dead photographer's various plates and the famous *Horse in Motion* reel that settled once and for all the matter of whether all four feet of the animal leave the ground during full gallop. For some reason the jittering frames of the buffalo plunging across the prairie made me uneasy. The images repeated until they shivered and the beast's hide grew thick and lustrous, until I swore foam bubbled from its snout, that its eye was fixed upon me with a malign purpose, and I squirmed in my seat and felt blood from my belly wound soaking the bandages. Sensing my discomfort, Helios Augustus patted my arm and advised me to steel myself for what was to come.

After the horse and buffalo, there arrived a stream of increasingly disjointed images that the magician informed me originated with numerous photographic experiments Muybridge indulged during his years teaching at university. These often involved men and women, likely students or staff, performing mundane tasks such as arranging books, or folding clothes, or sifting flour, in mundane settings such as parlors and kitchens. The routine gradually segued into strange territory. The subjects continued their plebian labors, but did so partially unclothed, and soon modesty was abandoned as were all garments. Yet there was nothing overtly sexual or erotic about the succeeding imagery. No, the sensations that crept over me were of anxiety and revulsion as a naked woman of middle age silently trundled about the confines of a workshop, fetching pails of water from a cistern and dumping them into a barrel. Much like the buffalo charging in place, she retraced her route with manic stoicism, endlessly, endlessly. A three-legged dog tracked her circuit by swiveling its misshapen skull. The dog fretted and scratched behind its ear and finally froze, snout pointed at the camera. The dog shuddered and rolled onto its side and frothed at the mouth while the woman continued, heedless, damned.

Next came a sequence of weirdly static shots of a dark, watery expanse. The quality was blurred and seemed alternately too close and too far. Milk-white mist crept into the frame. Eventually something large disturbed the flat ocean—a whale breaching, an iceberg bobbing to the surface. Ropes, or cables lashed and writhed and whipped the water to a sudsy froth. Scores of ropes, scores of cables. The spectacle hurt my brain. Mist thickened to pea soup and swallowed the final frame.

I hoped for the lights to come up and the film to end. Instead, Helios Augustus squeezed my forearm in warning as upon the screen a boy, naked as a jay, scuttled on all fours from a stony archway in what might've been a cathedral. The boy's expression distorted in the manner of a wild animal caged, or of a man as the noose tightens around his neck. His eyes and tongue protruded. He raised his head so sharply it seemed impossible that his spine wasn't wrenched, and his alacrity at advancing and retreating was wholly unnatural… well, ye gods, that had to be a trick of the camera. A horrid trick. "The boy is quite real," Helios Augustus said. "All that you see is real. No illusion, no stagecraft."

I tugged a handkerchief from my pocket and dabbed my brow. My hand was clammy. "Why in hell did he take those pictures?"

"No one knows. Muybridge was a man of varied moods. There were sides to him seen only under certain conditions and by certain people. He conducted these more questionable film experiments with strict secrecy. I imagine the tone and content disturbed the prudish elements at university —"

"You mean the sane folks."

"As you wish, the sane folks. None dared stand in the way of his scientific pursuits. The administration understood how much glory his fame would bring them, and all the money."

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah. The money. Thanks for the show, old man. Could have done without it, all the same."

"I wanted you to meet young master Conrad," the magician said. "Before you met Conrad the elder."

The boy on the screen opened his mouth. His silent scream pierced my eye, then my brain. For the first time in I don't know, I made the sign of the cross.

We loaded my luggage then swung by Dick, Bly, and Vernon's joints to fetch their essentials—a change of clothes, guns, and any extra hooch that was lying around. Then we made for the station and the evening train. Ah,

the silken rapture of riding the Starlight Express in a Pullman sleeper. Thank you, dear Mr. Arden, sir.

My companions shared the sleeper next to mine and they vowed to keep a watch over me as I rested. They'd already broken out a deck of cards and uncorked a bottle of whiskey as I limped from their quarters, so I wasn't expecting much in the way of protection. It was dark as the train steamed along between Olympia and Tacoma. I sat in the gloom and put the Thompson together and laid it beneath the coverlet. This was more from habit than expediency. Firing the gun would be a bastard with my busted fingers and I hoped it wouldn't come to that. I'd removed the bandages and let it be—a mass of purple and yellow bruises from the nails to my wrist. I could sort of make a fist and that was all that mattered, really.

I fell asleep, lulled by the rattle and sway of the car on the tracks, and dreamed of Bane's face, his bulging eyes, all that blood. Bane's death mask shimmered and sloughed into that of the boy in the film, an adolescent Conrad Paxton being put through his paces by an offstage tormentor. A celebrated ghoul who'd notched his place in the history books with some fancy imagination and a clever arrangement of lenses, bulbs, and springs.

Didn't last long, thank god as I snapped to when the train shuddered and slowed. Lamplight from some unknown station filtered through the blinds and sent shadows skittering across the ceiling and down the walls. I pointed the barrel at a figure hunched near the door, but the figure dissolved as the light shifted and revealed nothing more dangerous than my suitcase, the bulk of my jacket slung across a chair. I sat there a long while, breathing heavily as distant twinkly lights of passing towns floated in the great darkness.

The train rolled into Ransom Hollow and we disembarked at the Luster depot without incident. A cab relayed us to the Sycamore Hotel, the only game in the village. This was wild and wooly country, deep in the forested hills near the foot of the mountains. Ransom Hollow comprised a long, shallow river valley that eventually climbed into those mountains. An old roadmap marked the existence of three towns and a half dozen villages in the vicinity, each of them established during or prior to the westward expansion of the 1830s. Judging by the moss and shingle roofs of the squat and rude houses, most of them saltbox or shotgun shacks, the rutted

boardwalks and goats wandering the unpaved lanes, not much had changed since the era of mountain men trappers and gold rush placer miners.

The next morning we ate breakfast at a shop a couple of blocks from the hotel, then Dick and Bly departed to reconnoiter Paxton's estate while Vernon stayed with me. My hand and ear were throbbing. I stepped into the alley and had a gulp from a flask I'd stashed in my coat, and smoked one of the reefers Doc Green had slipped me the other day. Dope wasn't my preference, but it killed the pain far better than the booze did.

It was a scorcher of an autumn day and I hailed a cab and we rode in the back with the window rolled down. I smoked another cigarette and finished the whiskey; my mood was notably improved by the time the driver deposited us at our destination. The Corning sisters lived in a wooded neighborhood north of the town square. Theirs was a brick bungalow behind a steep walkup and gated entrance. Hedges blocked in the yard and its well-tended beds of roses and begonias. Several lawn gnomes crouched in the grass or peeked from the shrubbery; squat, wooden monstrosities of shin height, exaggerated features, pop-eyed and leering.

The bungalow itself had a European style peaked roof and was painted a cheery yellow. Wooden shutters bracketed the windows. Faces, similar to the sinister gnomes, were carved into the wood. The iron knocker on the main door was also shaped into a grinning, demonic visage. A naked man reclined against the hedge. He was average height, brawny as a Viking rower and sunburned. All over. His eyes were yellow. He spat in the grass and turned and slipped sideways through the hedge and vanished.

"What in hell?" Vernon said. He'd dressed in a bowler and an out of fashion jacket that didn't quite fit his lanky frame. He kept removing his tiny spectacles and smearing them around on his frayed sleeve. "See that lug? He was stark starin' nude!"

I doffed my Homburg and rapped the door, eschewing the knocker.

"Hello, Mr. Cope. And you must be Vernon. You're exactly how I imagined." A woman approached toward my left from around the corner of the house. She was tall, eye to eye with me, and softly middle-aged. Her hair was shoulder-length and black, her breasts full beneath a common-sense shirt and blouse. She wore pants and sandals. Her hands were dirty

and she held a trowel loosely at hip level. I kept an eye on the trowel—her manner reminded me of a Mexican knife fighter I'd tangled with once. The scar from the Mexican's blade traversed a span between my collar bone and left nipple.

"I didn't realize you were expecting me," I said, calculating the implications of Helios Augustus wiring ahead to warn her of my impending arrival.

"Taller than your father," she said. Her voice was harsh. The way she carefully enunciated each syllable suggested her roots were far from Washington. Norway, perhaps. The garden gnomes were definitely Old World knick-knacks.

"You knew my father? I had no idea."

"I've met the majority of Augustus' American friends. He enjoys putting them on display."

"Mrs. Corning—"

"Not Mrs.," she said. "This is a house of spinsters. I'm Carling. You'll not encounter Groa and Vilborg, alas. Come inside from this hateful sunlight. I'll make you a pudding." She hesitated and looked Vernon north to south and then smiled an unpleasant little smile that made me happy for some reason. "Your friend can take his ease out here under the magnolia. We don't allow pets in the cottage."

"Shut up," I said to Vernon when he opened his mouth to argue.

Carling led me into the dim interior of the bungalow and barred the door. The air was sour and close. Meat hooks dangled from low rafter beams and forced me to stoop lest I whack my skull. An iron cauldron steamed and burbled upon the banked coals of a hearth. A wide plank table ran along the wall. The table was scarred. I noted an oversized meat cleaver stuck into a plank near a platter full of curdled blood. The floor was filthy. I immediately began to reassess the situation and kept my coat open in case I needed to draw my pistol in a hurry.

"Shakespearean digs you've got here, Ma'am," I said as I brushed dead leaves from a chair and sat. "No thanks on the pudding, if you don't mind."

“Your hand is broken. And you seem to be missing a portion of your ear. Your father didn’t get into such trouble.”

“He got himself dead, didn’t he?”

In the next room, a baby cried briefly. Spinsters with a baby. I didn’t like it. My belly hurt and my ear throbbed in time with my spindled fingers and I wondered, the thought drifting out of the blue, if she could smell the blood soaking my undershirt.

Carling’s left eye drooped in either a twitch or a wink. She rummaged in a cabinet and then sprinkled a pinch of what appeared to be tea leaves into a cloudy glass. Down came a bottle of something that gurgled when she shook it. She poured three fingers into the glass and set it before me. Then she leaned against the counter and regarded me, idly drumming her fingers against her thigh. “We *weren’t* expecting you. However, your appearance isn’t particularly a surprise. Doubtless the magician expressed his good will by revealing Conrad Paxton’s designs upon you. The magician was sincerely fond of your father. He fancies himself an urbane and sophisticated man. Such individuals always have room for one or two brutes in their menagerie of acquaintances.”

“That was Dad, all right,” I said and withdrew a cigarette, pausing before striking the match until she nodded. I smoked for a bit while we stared at one another.

“I’ll read your fortune when you’ve finished,” she said indicating the glass of alcohol and the noisome vapors drifting forth. In the bluish light her features seemed more haggard and vulpine than they had in the bright, clean sunshine. “Although, I think I can guess.”

“Where’s Groa and Vilborg?” I snapped open the Korn switchblade I carried in the breast pocket of my shirt and stirred the thick dark booze with the point. The knife was a small comfort, but I was taking it where I could find it.

“Wise, very wise to remember their names, Johnny, may I call you Johnny? —and to utter them. Names do have power. My sisters are in the cellar finishing the task we’d begun prior to this interruption. You have us at a disadvantage. Were it otherwise… But you lead a charmed life, don’t you? There’s not much chance of your return after this, more is the pity.”

“What kind of task would that be?”

“The dark of the moon is upon us tonight. We conduct a ritual of longevity during the reaping season. It requires the most ancient and potent of sacrifices. Three days and three nights of intense labor, of which this morning counts as the first.”

“Cutting apart a hapless virgin, are we?”

Carling ran her thumbnail between her front teeth. A black dog padded into the kitchen from the passage that let from the living room where the cries had emanated and I thought perhaps it had uttered the noise. The dog’s eyes were yellow. It was the length and mass of a Saint Bernard, although its breed suggested that of a wolf. The dog smiled at me. Carling spoke a guttural phrase and unbarred the door and let it out. She shut the door and pressed her forehead against the frame.

“How do you know Paxton?” I said, idly considering her earlier comment about banning pets from the house.

“My sisters and I have ever been great fans of Eadweard’s photography. Absolute genius, and quite the conversationalist. I have some postcards he sent us from his travels. Very thoughtful in his own, idiosyncratic way. Quite loyal to those who showed the same to him. Conrad is Eadweard Muybridge’s dead wife’s son, a few minutes the elder of his brother, Florado. The Paxtons took him to replace their own infant who’d died at birth the very night Muybridge’s boys came into the world. Florado spent his youth in the institution. No talent to speak of. Worthless.”

“But there must’ve been some question of paternity in Muybridge’s mind. He left them to an institution in the first place. Kind of a rotten trick, you ask me.”

“Eadweard tried to convince himself the children were the get of that retired colonel his wife had been humping.”

“But they weren’t.”

“Oh, no—they belonged to Eadweard.”

“Yet, one remained at the orphanage, and Conrad was adopted. Why did Muybridge come back into the kid’s life? Guilt? Couldn’t be guilt since he left the twin to rot.”

“You couldn’t understand. Conrad was special, possessed of a peculiar darkness that Eadweard recognized later, after traveling in Central America doing goddess knows what. The boy was key to something very large and very important. We all knew that. Don’t ask and I’ll tell you no lies. Take it up with Conrad when you see him.”

“I don’t believe Paxton murdered my father,” I said. The baby in the other room moaned and I resisted the urge to look in that direction.

“Oh, then this is a social call? I would’ve fixed my hair, naughty boy.”

“I’m here because he sent a pair of guns after me in Seattle. I didn’t appreciate the gesture. Maybe I’m wrong, maybe he did blip my father. Two reasons to buzz him. Helios says you know the book on this guy. So, I come to you before I go to him.”

“Reconnaissance is always wisest. Murder is not precisely what occurred. Conrad drained your father’s life energy, siphoned it away via soul taking. You know of what I speak—photography, if done in a prescribed and ritualistic manner, can steal the subject’s life force. This had a side consequence of effecting Mr. Cope’s death. To be honest, Conrad didn’t do it personally. He isn’t talented in that area. He’s a dilettante of the black arts. He had it done by proxy, much the way your employer Mr. Arden has *you* do the dirty work for him.”

She was insane, obviously. Barking mad and probably very dangerous. God alone knew how many types of poison she had stashed up her sleeve. That cauldron of soup was likely fuming with nightshade, and my booze… I pushed it aside and brushed the blade against my pants leg. “Voodoo?” I said, just making conversation, wondering if I should rough her up a bit, if that was even wise, what with her dog and the naked guy roaming around. No confidence in Vernon whatsoever.

“There are many faiths at the crossroads here in the Hollow,” Carling said, bending to stir the pot and good god her shoulders were broad as a logger’s. “Voodoo is not one of them. I can’t tell you who did in your father, only that it was done and that Conrad ordered it so. I recommend you make haste to the Paxton estate and do what you do best—rub the little shit out before he does for you. He tried once, he’ll definitely take another crack at it.”

“Awfully harsh words for your old chum,” I said to her brawny backside. “Two of you must have had a lovers’ quarrel.”

“He’s more of a godson. I don’t have a problem with Conrad. He’s vicious and vengeful and wants my head on a stick, but I don’t hold that against him in the slightest.”

“Then why are you so interested in seeing him get blipped?”

“You seem like a nice boy, Johnny.” Carling turned slowly and there was something amiss with her face that I couldn’t quite figure out. That nasty grin was back, though. “Speaking of treachery and violence, that other fellow you brought is no good. I wager he’ll bite.”

“Think so?” I said. “He’s just along for the ride.”

“Bah. Let us bargain. Leave your friend with us and I’ll give you a present. I make knick-knacks, charms, trinkets and such. What you really need if you’re going to visit the Paxton estate is a talisman to ward off the diabolic. It wouldn’t do to go traipsing in there as you are.”

“I agree. I’ll be sure to pack a shotgun.”

She cackled. Actually and truly cackled. “Yes, yes, for the best. Here’s a secret few know—I wasn’t always a spinster. In another life I traveled to India and China and laid with many, many men, handsomer than you even. They were younger and unspoiled. I nearly, very, very nearly married a rich Chinaman who owned a great deal of Hainan.”

“Didn’t work out, eh? Sorry to hear it, Ms. Corning.”

“He raised monkeys. I hate monkeys worse than Christ.” She went through the door into the next room and I put my hand on the pistol from reflex and perhaps a touch of fear, but she returned with nothing more sinister than a shriveled black leaf in her open palm. Not a leaf, I discovered upon receiving it, but a dry cocoon. She dropped it into my shirt pocket, just leaned over and did it without asking and up close she smelled of spice and dirt and unwashed flesh.

“Thanks,” I said recoiling from the proximity of her many large, sharp teeth.

“Drink your whiskey and run along.”

I stared at the glass. It smelled worse than turpentine.

“Drink your fucking whiskey,” she said.

And I did, automatic as you please. It burned like acid.

She snatched the empty glass and regarded the constellation of dregs at the bottom. She grinned, sharp as a pickaxe. “He’s throwing a party in a couple of nights. Does one every week. Costumes, pretty girls, rich trappers and furriers, our rustic nobility. It augers well for you to attend.”

I finally got my breath back. “In that case, the furriers’ ball it is.”

She smiled and patted my cheek. “Good luck. Keep the charm on your person. Else…” She smiled sadly and straightened to her full height. “Might want to keep this visit between you and me.”

Vernon was missing when I hit the street. The cab driver shrugged and said he hadn’t seen anything. No reason not to believe him, but I dragged him by the hair from the car and belted him around some on the off chance he was lying. Guy wasn’t lying, though. There wasn’t any way I’d go back into that abattoir of a cottage to hunt for the lost snowbird, so I decided on a plausible story to tell the boys. Vernon was the type slated to end it face down in a ditch, anyway. Wouldn’t be too hard to sell the tale and frankly, watching Bly stew and fret would be a treat.

Never did see Vernon again.

Dick and Bly hadn’t gotten very close to the Paxton mansion. The estate was guarded by a bramble-covered stone wall out of *Sleeping Beauty*, a half mile of wildwood and overgrown gardens, then croquet courses, polo fields, and a small barracks that housed a contingent of fifteen or so backwoods thugs armed with shotguns and dogs. God alone knew where Paxton had recruited such a gang. I figured they must be either locals pressed into service or real talent from out of state. No way to tell without tangling with them, though.

Dick had cased the joint with field glasses and concluded a daylight approach would be risky as hell. Retreat and regrouping seemed the preferable course, thus we decided to cool our heels and get skunk drunk.

The boys had caught wind of a nasty speakeasy in a cellar near Belson Creek in neighboring Olde Towne. A girl Bly had picked up in the parking lot of Luster's one and only hardware store claimed men with real hard bark on them hung around there. Abigail and Bly were real chummy, it seemed, and he told her we were looking to put the arm on a certain country gentleman. The girl suggested low at the heel scoundrels who tenanted the dive might be helpful.

The speakeasy was called Satan's Bung and the password at the door was Van Iblis, all of this Dick had discovered from his own temporary girls, Wanda and Clementine, which made me think they'd spent most of the day reconnoitering a watering hole rather than pursuing our mission with any zeal. In any event, we sashayed into that den of iniquity with sweet little chippies who still had most of their teeth, a deck of unmarked cards, and a bottle of sour mash. There were a few tough guys hanging around, as advertised; lumberjacks in wool coats and sawdust-sprinkled caps and cork boots; the meanest of the lot even hoisted his axe onto the bar. One gander at my crew and they looked the other way right smartly. Some good old boys came down from the hills or out of the swamp, hitched their overalls and commenced to picking banjos, banging drums, and harmonizing in an angelic chorus that belied their sodden, bloated, and warty features, their shaggy beards and knurled scalps. They clogged barefoot, stamping like bulls ready for battle.

Dick, seven sails to the wind, wondered aloud what could be done in the face of determined and violent opposition entrenched at the Paxton estate and I laughed and told him not to worry too much, this was a vacation. Relax and enjoy himself—I'd think of something. I always thought of something.

Truth of it was, I'd lost a bit of my stomach for the game after tea and cake at the Corning Sisters' house and the resultant disappearance of Vernon. If it hadn't been for the rifling of my home, the attack by the Long and the Short, the mystery of whether Paxton really bopped Dad would've remained a mystery. Thus, despite my reassurances to the contrary, I wasn't drinking and plotting a clever plan of assault or infiltration of the estate, but rather simply drinking and finagling a way to get my ashes hauled by one of the chippies.

One thing led to another, a second bottle of rotgut to a third, and Clementine climbed into my lap and nuzzled my neck and unbuttoned my pants and slipped her hand inside. Meanwhile a huge man in a red and black checkered coat and coonskin cap pranced, nimble as a Russian ballerina, and wheedled a strange tune on a flute of lacquered black ivory. This flautist was a hirsute, wiry fellow with a jagged visage hacked from a stone, truly more beast than man by his gesticulations and the manner he gyrated his crotch, thrusting to the beat, and likely the product of generations of inbreeding, yet he piped with an evil and sinuous grace that captured the admiration of me, my companions, the entire roomful of seedy and desperate characters. The lug seemed to fixate upon me, glaring and smirking as he clicked his heels and puffed his cheeks and capered among the tables like a faun.

I conjectured aloud as to his odd behavior, upon which Dick replied in a slur that if I wanted him to give the bird a thrashing, just make the sign. My girl, deep into her cups, mumbled that the flautist was named Dan Blackwood, last scion of a venerable Ransom Hollow family renowned as hunters and furriers without peer, but these days runners of moonshine. A rapist and murderer who'd skated out of prison by decree of the prince of Darkness Hissownself, or so the fireside talk went. A fearful and loathsome brute, his friends were few and of similar malignant ilk and were known as the Blackwood Boys. Her friend Abigail paused from licking Bly's earlobe to concur.

Dan Blackwood trilled his oddly sinister tune while a pair of hillbillies accompanied him with banjo and fiddle and a brawny lad with golden locks shouldered aside the piano player and pawed the ivories to create a kind of screeching cacophony not unlike a train wreck while the paper lanterns dripped down blood-red light and the cellar audience clenched into a tighter knot and swayed on their feet, their stools and stumps, stamping time against the muddy floor. From that cacophony a dark and primitive rhythm emerged as each instrument fell into line with its brother and soon that wattled and toad-like orchestra found unity with their piper and produced a song that put ice in my loins and welded me to my seat. Each staccato burst from the snare drum, each shrill from the flute, each discordant clink from the piano, each nails on slate shriek of violin and fiddle, pierced my brain,

caused a sweet, agonizing lurch of my innards, and patient Clementine jerked my cock, out of joint, so to speak.

The song ended with a bang and a crash and the crowd swooned. More tunes followed and more people entered that cramped space and added to the sensation we were supplicants or convicts in a special circle of hell, such was the ripe taint of filthy work clothes and matted hair and belched booze like sulfurous counterpoint to the maniacal contortions of the performers, the rich foul effluvium of their concert.

During an intermission, I extricated myself from industrious Clementine and made my way up the stairs into the alley to piss against the side of the building. The darkness was profound, moonless as Carling had stated, and the stars were covered by a thin veil of cloud. Despite my best efforts, I wasn't particularly impaired and thus wary and ready for trouble when the door opened and a group of men, one bearing a lantern that oozed the hideous red glow, spilled forth and mounted the stairs. The trio stopped at the sight of me and raised the lantern high so that it scattered a nest of rats into the hinder of the lane. I turned to face them, hand on pistol, and I smiled and hoped Dick or Bly might come tripping up the steps at any moment.

But there was no menace evinced by this group, at least not aimed at me. The leader was the handsome blond lad who'd hammered the piano into submission. He saluted me with two fingers and said, "Hey, now city feller. My name's Candy. How'n ya like our burg?" The young man didn't wait for an answer, but grunted at his comrades, the toad-like fiddler and banjo picker who might've once been conjoined and later separated with an axe blow, then said to me in his thick, unfamiliar accent, "So, chum, the telegraph sez you in Ransom Holler on dirty business. My boss knows who yer gunnin' for and he'd be pleased as punch to make yer acquaintance."

"That's right civilized. I was thinking of closing this joint down, though…"

"Naw, naw, ol' son. Ya gotta pay the piper round this neck of the woods."

I asked who and where and the kid laughed and said to get my friends and follow him, and to ease my mind the men opened their coats to show they weren't packing heat. Big knives and braining clubs wrapped in leather and nail-studded, but no pea shooters and I thought again how Dick had

managed to learn of this place and recalled something about one of the girls, perhaps Abigail, whispering the name into his ear and a small chill crept along my spine. Certainly Paxton could be laying a trap, and he wasn't the only candidate for skullduggery. Only the good lord knew how strongly the Corning sisters interfered in the politics of the Hollow and if they'd set the Blackwood Gang upon us, and of course this caused my suspicious mind to circle back to Helios Augustus and his interest in the affair. Increasingly I kicked myself for not having shot him when I'd the chance and before he could take action against me, assuming my paranoid suppositions bore weight. So, I nodded and tipped my hat and told the Blackwood Boys to bide a moment.

Dick and Bly were barely coherent when I returned to gather them and the girls. Bly, collar undone, eyes crossed and blinking, professed incredulity that we would even consider traveling with these crazed locals to some as yet unknown location. Dick didn't say anything, although his mouth curved down at the corners with the distaste of a man who'd gulped castor oil. We both understood the score; no way on God's green earth we'd make it back to Luster and our heavy armament if the gang wanted our skins. Probably wouldn't matter even if we actually managed to get armed. This was the heart of midnight and the best and only card to turn was to go for a ride with the devil. He grabbed Bly's arm and dragged him along after me, the goodtime girls staggering in our wake. Ferocious lasses—they weren't keen on allowing their meal tickets to escape, and clutched our sleeves and wailed like the damned.

Young master Candy gave our ragged assembly a bemused once-over, then shrugged and told us to get a move on, starlight was wasting. He led us to a great creaking behemoth of a farm truck with raised sides to pen in livestock and bade us pile into the bed. His compatriot the fiddler was already a boulder slumped behind the steering wheel.

I don't recall the way because it was pitch black and the night wind stung my eyes. We drove along Belson Creek and crossed it on rickety narrow bridges and were soon among ancient groves of poplar and fir, well removed from Olde Towne or any other lighted habitation. The road was rutted and the jarring threatened to rip my belly open. I spent most of the

thankfully brief ride doubled, hands pressed hard against the wound, hoping against hope to keep my guts on the inside.

The truck stopped briefly and Candy climbed down to scrape the ruined carcass of a raccoon or opossum from the dirt and chucked it into the bed near our feet. Bly groaned and puked onto his shoes and the girls screamed or laughed or both. Dick was a blurry white splotch in the shadows and from the manner he hunched, I suspected he had a finger on the trigger of the revolver in his pocket. Most likely, he figured I'd done in poor, stupid Vernon and was fixing to dust that weasel Bly next, hell maybe I'd go all in and make a play for Mr. Arden. These ideas were far from my mind (well, dusting Bly was a possibility), naturally. Suicide wasn't my intent. Nonetheless, I couldn't fault Dick for worrying; could only wonder, between shocks to my kidneys and gut from the washboard track, how he would land if it ever came time to choose teams.

The fiddler swung the truck along a tongue of gravel that unrolled deep inside a bog and we came to a ramshackle hut, a trapper or fisherman's abode, raised on stilts that leaned every which way like a spindly, decrepit daddy longlegs with a house on its back. Dull, scaly light flickered through windows with tanned skins for curtains and vaguely illuminated the squelching morass of a yard with its weeds and moss and rusty barrels half sunk in the muck, and close by in the shadows came the slosh of Belson Creek churning fitfully as it dreamed. Another truck rolled in behind us and half a dozen more goons wordlessly unloaded and stood around, their faces obscured in the gloom. All of them bore clubs, mattock handles, and gaff hooks.

There was a kind of ladder descending from a trapdoor and on either side were strung moldering nets and the moth-eaten hides of beasts slaughtered decades ago and chains of animal bones and antlers that jangled when we bumped them in passing. I went first, hoping to not reinjure my hand while entertaining visions of a sledgehammer smashing my skull, or a machete lopping my melon at the neck as I passed through the opening. Ducks in Tin Pan Alley is what we were.

Nobody clobbered me with a hammer, nobody chopped me with an axe and I hoisted myself into the sooty confines of Dan Blackwood's shanty. Beaver hides were stretched into circles and tacked on the walls, probably to cover

the knotholes and chinks in a vain effort to bar the gnats and mosquitoes that swarmed the bog. Bundles of fox and muskrat hide were twined at the muzzle and hung everywhere and black bear furs lay in heaps and crawled with sluggish flies. A rat crouched enthroned high atop one mound, sucking its paws. It regarded me with skepticism. Light came from scores of candles, coagulated slag of black and white, and rustic kerosene lamps I wagered had seen duty in Gold Rush mines. The overwhelming odors were that of animal musk, lye, and peat smoke. Already, sweat poured from me and I wanted another dose of mash.

That sinister flautist Dan Blackwood tended a cast iron stove, fry pan in one fist, spatula in the other. He had already prepared several platters of flapjacks. He wore a pork pie hat cocked at a precipitous angle. A bear skin covered him after a burlesque fashion.

“Going to be one of those nights, isn’t it?” I said as my friends and hangers on clambered through the hatch and stood blinking and gawping at their surroundings, this taxidermy post in Hades.

“Hello, cousin. Drag up a stump. Breakfast is at hand.” Blackwood’s voice was harsh and thin and came through his long nose. At proximity, his astounding grotesqueness altered into a perverse beauty, such were the chiseled planes and crags of his brow and cheek, the lustrous blackness of his matted hair that ran riot over his entire body. His teeth were perfectly white when he smiled, and he smiled often.

The cakes, fried in pure lard and smothered in butter and maple syrup, were pretty fucking divine. Blackwood ate with almost dainty precision and his small, dark eyes shone brightly in the candle flame and ye gods the heat from the stove was as the heat from a blast furnace and soon all of us were in shirt sleeves or less, the girls quickly divested themselves of blouse and skirt and lounged around in their dainties. I didn’t care about the naked chickadees; my attention was divided between my recurrent pains of hand and ear, and gazing in wonder at our satyr host, lacking only his hooves to complete the image of the great god Pan taking a mortal turn as a simple gang boss. We had him alone—his men remained below in the dark—and yet, in my bones I felt it was me and Dick and Bly who were at a disadvantage if matters went south.

“Don’t get a lot of fellows with your kind of bark around here,” Blackwood said. He reclined in a heavy wooden chair padded with furs, not unlike the throne of a feudal lord who was contemplating the fate of some unwelcome itinerant vagabonds. “Oh, there’s wild men and murderous types aplenty, but not professional gunslingers. I hear tell you’ve come to the Hollow with blood in your eye, and who put it there? Why dear little Connie Paxton, of course; the moneybags who rules from his castle a few miles yonder as the crow wings it.”

“Friend of yours?” I said, returning his brilliant smile with one of my own as I gauged the speed I could draw the Luger and pump lead into that hairy torso. Clementine slithered over and caressed my shoulders and kissed my neck. Her husband had been a merchant marine during the Big One, had lain in Davey Jones’s Locker since 1918. Her nipples were hard as she pressed against my back.

Blackwood kept right on smiling. “Friend is a powerful word, cousin. Almost as powerful as a true name. It’s more proper to say Mr. Paxton and I have a pact. Keepin’ the peace so we can all conduct our nefarious trades, well that’s a sacred duty.”

“I understand why you’d like things to stay peaceful,” I said.

“No, cousin, you *don’t* understand. The Hollow is far from peaceful. We do surely love our bloodlettin’, make no mistake. Children go missin’ from their beds and tender maidens are ravished by Black Bill of the Wood,” he winked at slack-jawed and insensate Abigail who lay against Bly, “and just the other day the good constable Jarred Brown discovered the severed head of his best deputy floatin’ in Belson Creek. Alas, poor Ned Smedley. I knew him, Johnny! Peaceful, this territory ain’t. On the other hand, we’ve avoided full scale battle since that machine gun incident at the Luster court house in 1910. This fragile balance between big predators is oh so delicately strung. And along come you Gatlin-totin’ hard-asses from the big town to upset everything. What shall I do with you, cousin, oh what?”

“Jesus, these are swell flapjacks, Mr. Blackwood,” Bly said. His rummy eyes were glazed as a stuffed dog’s.

“Why, thank you, sirrah. At the risk of soundin’ trite, it’s an old family recipe. Wheat flour, salt, sugar, eggs from a black speckled virgin hen, dust

from the bones of a Pinkerton, a few drops of his heart blood. Awful decadent, I'll be so gauche as to agree."

None of us said anything until Clementine muttered into my good ear, "Relax, baby. You ain't a lawman, are you? You finer than frog's hair." She nipped me.

"Yes, it is true," Blackwood said. "Our faithful government employees have a tendency to get short shrift. The Hollow voted and decided we'd be best off if such folk weren't allowed to bear tales. This summer a couple government rats, Pinkerton men, came sniffin' round for moonshine stills and such. Leto, Brutus and Candy, you've met 'em, dragged those two agents into the bog and buried 'em chest deep in the mud. My lads took turns batterin' out their brains with those thumpers they carry on their belts. I imagine it took a while. Boys play rough. Candy worked in a stockyard. He brained the cattle when they came through the chute. Got a taste for it." He glanced at the trap door when he said this.

"Powerful glad I'm no Pinkerton," I said.

He opened his hand and reached across the space between us as if he meant to grasp my neck, and at the last moment he flinched and withdrew and his smile faded and the beast in him came near the surface. "You've been to see those bitches."

"The Corning ladies? Come to think of it, yes, I had a drink with the sisters. Now I'm having breakfast with you. Don't be jealous, Dan." I remained perfectly still and as poised as one can be with sweat in his eyes, a hard-on in progress, and consumed by rolling waves of blue-black pain. My own beast was growling and slamming its Stone Age muzzle against the bars. It wanted blood to quench its terror, wanted loose. "What do you have against old ladies. They didn't mention you."

"Our business interests lie at cross-purposes. I don't relish no competition. Wait. Wait a minute… Did you see the child?" Blackwood asked this in a hushed tone, and his face smoothed into a false calmness, probably a mirror of my own. Oh, we were trying very hard not to slaughter one another. He cocked his head and whispered, "John, did you see the child?"

That surely spooked me, and the teary light in his eyes spooked me too, but not half so much as the recollection of the cries in the dim room at the

Corning bungalow. “No. I didn’t.”

He watched me for a while, watched me until even Dick and Bly began to rouse from their reveries to straighten and cast puzzled looks between us. Blackwood kept flexing his hand, clenching and tearing at an invisible throat, perhaps. “All right. That’s hunkum-bunkum.” His smile returned. “The crones don’t have no children.”

I wiped my palms to dry the sweat and lighted a cigarette and smoked it to cover my expression. After a few moments I said, “Does Paxton know I’m here?”

“Yes. Of course. The forest has eyes, the swamp ears. Why you’ve come to give him the buzz is the mystery.”

“Hell with that. Some say he’s at the root of trouble with my kin. Then there’s the goons he sent my way. I didn’t start this. Going to end it, though.”

“Mighty enterprising, aren’t you? A real dyed in the wool bad man.”

“What is this pact? I wager it involves plenty of cabbage.”

“An alliance, bad man. He and I versus the damnable crones and that rotgut they try to pass off as whiskey. Little Lord Paxton is moneyed up real good. He inherited well. In any event, he keeps palms greased at the Governor’s mansion and in turn, I watch his back. Been that way for a while. It’s not perfect; I don’t cotton to bowing and scraping. Man does what man must.”

“Who funds the sisters?”

“Some say they buried a fortune in mason jars. Gold ingots from the Old World. Maybe, after they’re gone, me and the lads will go treasure hunting on their land.”

So, I’d well and truly fallen from fry pan to fire. Paxton wanted me dead, or captured, thus far the jury remained out on that detail, and here I’d skipped into the grasp of his chief enforcer. “Hell, I made it easy for you lugs, eh? Walked right into the box.” I nodded and decided that this was the end of the line and prepared to draw my pistol and go pay Saint Peter my respects with an empty clip. “Don’t think I’ll go quietly. We Copes die real hard.”

“Hold on a second,” Bly said, sobering in a hurry. I didn’t think the Bly clan had a similar tradition.

Blackwood patted him on the head. “No need for heroics, gents. We’ve broken bread, haven’t we? You can hop on Shank’s Mare and head for the tall timber anytime you like. Nobody here’s gonna try to stop you. On the other paw, I was kind of hoping you might stick around the Hollow, see this affair through.”

I sat there and gaped, thunderstruck. “We can walk out of here.” My senses strained, alert for the snare that must lurk within his affable offer. “What do you want, Dan?”

“Me and the boys recently were proposed a deal by… Well, that’s none of your concern. A certain party has entered the picture, is enough to say. We been offered terms that trump our arrangement with Paxton. Trump it in spades. Problem is, I’ve sworn an oath to do him no harm, so that ties my hands.”

“That’s where I come in.”

“You’ve said a mouthful, and no need to say more. We’ll let it ride, see how far it takes us.”

“And if I want to cash in and take my leave?”

He shrugged and left me to dangle in the wind. I started to ask another question, and thought better of it and sat quietly, my mind off to the races. Dan’s smile got even wider. “Candy will squire you back to the Sycamore. There’s a garden party and dinner. All the pretty folk will be there tying one on. Dress accordingly, eh?”

Candy returned us to the hotel where my entourage collapsed, semiclothed and pawing one another, into a couple of piles on the beds. Dawn leaked through the curtains and I was queerly energized despite heavy drinking and nagging wounds, so I visited the nearby café as the first customer. I drank bad coffee in a corner booth as locals staggered in and ordered plates of hash and eggs and muttered and glowered at one another; beasts awakened too soon from hibernation. I fished in my pocket and retrieved the cocoon Carling had given me and lay it on the edge of the saucer. It resembled a

slug withered by salt and dried in the hot sun. I wondered if my father, a solid, yet philosophically ambiguous, Catholic, ever carried a good luck charm. What else was a crucifix or a rosary?

"You know you're playing the fool." I said this aloud, barely a mutter, just enough to clear the air between my passions and my higher faculties. Possibly I thought giving voice to the suspicion would formalize matters, break the spell and justify turning the boat around and sailing home, or making tracks for sunny Mexico and a few days encamping on a beach with a bottle of whiskey and a couple of *senoritas* who didn't habla ingles. At that moment a goose waddled over my grave and the light reflecting from the waitress's coffee pot bent strangely and the back of my neck went cold. I looked down the aisle through the doorway glass and spotted a couple of the Blackwood Boys loitering in the bushes of a vacant lot across the way. One was the big fiddler, the other wore overalls and a coonskin cap. The fiddler rested his weight on the handle of what at first I took for a shovel. When he raised the object and laid it across his shoulder I recognized it as a sword, one of those Scottish claymores.

A party and in my finest suit and tie it would be. Goddamn, if they were going to be this way about it I'd go see the barber after breakfast and have a haircut and a shave.

It was as Blackwood promised. We drove over to the mansion in a Cadillac I rented from the night clerk at the hotel. Even if the guys hadn't scoped the joint out previously, we would've easily found our way by following a small parade of fancy vehicles bound for the estate. Bly rolled through the hoary, moss-encrusted gates and the mansion loomed like a castle on the horizon. He eased around the side and parked in the back. We came through the servants' entrance. Dick and Bly packing shotguns, me with the Thompson slung under my arm. Men in livery were frantically arranging matters for the weekly estate hoedown and the ugly mugs with the guns made themselves scarce.

Conrad Paxton was on the veranda. He didn't seem at all surprised when I barged in and introduced myself. He smiled a thin, deadly smile and waved to an empty seat. "*Et tu* Daniel?" he said to himself, and chuckled. "Please,

have a drink. Reynolds," he snapped his fingers at a bland older man wearing a dated suit, "fetch, would you? And, John, please, tell your comrades to take a walk. Time for the men to chat."

Dick and Bly waited. I gave the sign and they put the iron away under their trench coats and scrammed. A minute or two later, they reappeared on the lawn amid the hubbub and stood where they could watch us. Everybody ignored them.

I leaned the Thompson against the railing and sat across from my host. We regarded each other for a while as more guests arrived and the party got underway.

Finally, he said, "This moment was inevitable. One can only contend with the likes of Blackwood and his ilk for a finite period before they turn on one like the wild animals they are. I'd considered moving overseas, somewhere with a more hospitable clime. No use, my enemies will never cease to pursue, and I'd rather die in my home. Well, Eadweard's, technically." Conrad Paxton's face was long and narrow. His fingers were slender. He smoked fancy European cigarettes with a filter and an ivory cigarette holder. Too effete for cigars, I imagined. Well, me too, chum, me too.

"Maybe if you hadn't done me and mine dirt you'd be adding candles to your cake for a spell yet."

"Ah, *done you dirt.* I can only imagine what poppycock you've been told to set you upon me. My father knew your father. Now the sons meet. Too bad it's not a social call—I'm hell with social calls. You have the look of a soldier."

"Did my bit."

"What did you do in the war, John?"

"I shot people."

"Ha. So did my father, albeit with a camera. As for me, I do nothing of consequence except drink my inheritance, collect moldy tomes, and also the envy of those who'd love to appropriate what I safeguard in this place. You may think of me as a lonely, rich caretaker."

"Sounds miserable," I said.

Afternoon light was dimming to red through the trees that walled in the unkempt concourses of green lawn. Some twenty minutes after our arrival, and still more Model Ts, Packards and Studebakers formed a shiny black and white procession along the crushed gravel drive, assembling around the central fountain, a twelve-foot-tall marble faun gone slightly green around the gills from decades of mold. Oh, the feather boas and peacock feather hats, homburgs and stovepipes! Ponderously loaded tables of *hors d'oeuvres*, including a splendid tiered cake, and pails of frosty cold punch, liberally dosed with rum, were arrayed beneath fluttering silk pavilions. Servants darted among the gathering throng and unpacked orchestral instruments on a nearby dais. Several others worked the polo fields, hoisting buckets as they bent to reapply chalk lines, or smooth divots, or whatever.

Dick and Bly, resigned to their fate, loitered next to the punch, faces gray and pained even at this hour, following the legendary excesses of the previous evening. Both had cups in hand and were tipping them regularly. As for Paxton's goons, those gents continued to maintain a low profile, confined to the fancy bunkhouse at the edge of the property, although doubtless a few of them lurked in the shrubbery or behind the trees. My fingers were crossed that Blackwood meant to keep his bargain. Best plan I had.

A bluff man with a pretty young girl stuck on his arm waved to us. Paxton indolently returned the gesture. He inserted the filter between his lips and dragged exaggeratedly. "That would be the mayor. Best friend of whores and moonshiners in the entire county."

"I like that in a politician," I said. "Let's talk about you."

"My story is rather dreary. Father bundled me off to the orphanage then disappeared into Central America for several years. Another of his many expeditions. None of them made him famous. He became *famous* for murdering that colonel and driving Mother into an early grave. I also have his slide collection and his money." Paxton didn't sound too angry for someone with such a petulant mouth. I supposed the fortune he'd inherited when his father died sweetened life's bitter pills.

“My birth father, Eadweard Muybridge, died in his native England in 1904. I missed the funeral, and my brother Florado’s as well. I’m a cad that way. Floddie got whacked by a car in San Francisco. Of all the bloody luck, eh? Father originally sent me and my brother to the orphanage where I was adopted by the Paxtons as an infant. My real mother named me Conrad after a distant cousin. Conrad Gallatry was a soldier and died in the Philippines fighting in the Spanish-American War.

“As a youth, I took scant interest in my genealogy, preferring to eschew the coarseness of these roots, and knew the barest facts regarding Eadweard Muybridge beyond his reputation as a master photographer and eccentric. Father was a peculiar individual. In 1875 Eadweard killed his wife’s, and my dearest mum, presumed lover—he’d presented that worthy, a retired colonel, with an incriminating romantic letter addressed to Mrs. Muybridge in the Colonel’s hand, uttered a pithy remark, and then shot him dead. Father’s defense consisted of not insubstantial celebrity, his value to science, and a claim of insanity as the result of an old coach accident that crushed his skull, in addition to the understandable anguish at discovering Mum’s betrayal. I can attest the attribution of insanity was correct, albeit nothing to do with the crash, as I seemed to have come by my moods and anxieties honestly. Blood will tell.”

“You drowned a boy at your school,” I said. “And before that, your stepsister vanished. Somewhat of a scoundrel as a lad, weren’t you?”

“So they say. What they say is far kinder than the truth. Especially for my adopted Mum and Da. My stepsister left evidence behind, which, predictably, the Paxtons obscured for reasons of propriety. They suspected the truth and those suspicions were confirmed when I killed that nit Abelard Fries in our dormitory. A much bolder act, that murder. And again, the truth was obfuscated by the authorities, by my family. No, word of what I’d really done could not be allowed to escape our circle. You see, for me, it had already begun. I was already on the path of enlightenment, seeker and sometimes keeper of *Mysterium Tremendum et fascinans.* Even at that tender age.”

“All of you kooky bastards in this county into black magic?” I’d let his insinuations regarding the fate of his sister slide from my mind, dismissing

a host of ghastly speculative images as they manifested and hung between us like phantom smoke rings.

"Only the better class of people."

"You sold your soul at age nine, or thereabouts. Is that it, man? Then daddy came home from the jungle one day and took you in because… because why?"

"Sold my soul? Hardly. I traded up. You didn't come to me to speak of that. You're an interesting person, John. *Not* interesting enough for this path of mine. Your evils are definitely, tragically lowercase."

"Fine, let's not dance. Word is, you did for my father. Frankly, I was attached to him. That means we've got business."

"Farfetched, isn't it? Didn't he choke on a sandwich or something?"

"I'm beginning to wonder. More pressing: Why did you try to have me rubbed out? To keep me in the dark about you bopping my dad? That wasn't neighborly."

"I didn't harm your father. Never met the man, although Eadweard spoke of him, wrote of him. Your old man made a whale of an impression on people he didn't kill. Nor did I dispatch those hooligans who braced you in Seattle. Until you and your squad lumbered into Ransom Hollow, I had scant knowledge and exactly zero interest in your existence. Helios Augustus certainly engineered the whole charade. The old goat knew full well you'd respond unkindly to the ministrations of fellow Johnson Brothers, that you'd do for them, or they for you, and the winner, spurred by his wise counsel, would come seeking my scalp."

"Ridiculous. Hand them a roll of bills and they'll blip anyone you please, no skullduggery required."

"This is as much a game as anything. Your father was responsible for Eadweard's troubles with the law. Donald Cope is the one who put the idea of murder in his head, the one who mailed the gun that Eadweard eventually used on the retired officer who'd dallied with my mother. Eadweard wasn't violent, but your father was the devil on his shoulder telling him to be a man, to smite his enemy. After pulling the trigger, my father went off the rails, disappeared into the world and when he returned,

he had no use for Helios Augustus, or anyone. He was his own man, in a demented fashion. Meanwhile, Helios Augustus, who had spent many painstaking years cultivating and mentoring Eadweard, was beside himself. The magician was no simple cardsharp on a barge whom your father just happened to meet. One of his myriad disguises. His posturing as a magician, famous or not, is yet another. Helios Augustus is a servant of evil and he manipulates everyone, your father included. Donald Cope was meant to be a tool, a protector of Eadweard. A loyal dog. He wasn't supposed to dispense wisdom, certainly not his own homespun brand of hooliganism. He ruined the magician's plan. Ruined everything, it seems."

I was accustomed to liars, bold-faced or wide-eyed, silver tongued or pleading, often with the barrel of my gun directed at them as they babbled their last prayers to an indifferent god, squirted their last tears into the indifferent earth. A man will utter any falsehood, commit any debasement, sell his own children down the river, to avoid that final sweet goodnight.

Paxton wasn't a liar, though. I studied him and his sallow, indolent affectation of plantation suzerainty, the dark power in his gaze, and beheld with clarity he was a being who had no need for deception, that all was delivered to him on a platter. He wasn't afraid, either. I couldn't decide whether that lack of fear depended upon his access to the Blackwood Boys, his supreme and overweening sense of superiority, an utter lack of self-preservation instincts, or something else as yet to make its presence felt. Something dread and terrible in the wings was my guess, based upon the pit that opened in my gut as we talked while the sun sank into the mountains and the shadows of the gibbering and jabbering gentry spread grotesquely across the grass.

"You said Augustus groomed Muybridge."

"Yes. Groomed him to spread darkness with his art. And Father did, though not to the degree or with the potency Helios Augustus desired. The sorcerer and his allies believed Eadweard was tantalizingly close to unlocking something vast and inimical to human existence."

The guests stirred and the band ascended the dais, each member lavishly dressed in a black suit, hair slicked with oil and banded in gold or silver, each cradling an oboe, a violin, a horn, a double bass, and of course, of

fucking course, Dan Blackwood at the fore with his majestic flute, decked in a classical white suit and black tie, his buttered down hair shining like an angel's satin wing. They nodded to one another and began to play soft and sweet chamber music from some German symphony that was popular when lederhosen reigned at court. Music to calm a bellicose Holy Roman Emperor. Music beautiful enough to bring a tear to a killer's eye.

I realized Dick and Bly had disappeared. I stood, free hand pressed to my side to keep the bandage from coming unstuck. "Your hospitality is right kingly, Mr. Paxton, sir—"

"Indeed? You haven't touched your brandy. I'm guessing that's a difficult bit of self restraint for an Irishman. It's not poisoned. Heavens, man, I couldn't harm you if that were my fiercest desire."

"Mr. Paxton, I'd like to take you at your word. Problem is, Curtis Bane had a card with your name written on it in his pocket. That's how I got wind of you."

"Extraordinarily convenient. And world famous magician Phil Wary, oh dear, my mistake—Helios Augustus—showed you some films my father made and told you I'd set the dogs on your trail. Am I correct?"

"Yeah, that's right." The pit in my belly kept crumbling away. It would be an abyss pretty soon. It wasn't that the pale aristocrat had put the puzzle together that made me sick with nerves, it was his boredom and malicious glee at revealing the obvious to a baboon. My distress was honey to him.

"And let me ponder this… Unnecessary. Helios put you in contact with those women in Luster. The crones, as some rudely call them."

"I think the ladies prefer it, actually."

"The crones were coy, that's their game. As you were permitted to depart their presence with your hide, I'll wager they confirmed the magician's slander of my character. Wily monsters, the Corning women. Man-haters, man-eaters. Men are pawns or provender, often both. Word to the wise—never go back there."

Just like that the sun snuffed as a burning wick under a thumb and darkness was all around, held at bay by a few lanterns in the yard, a trickle of light from the open doors on the porch and a handful of windows. The guests

milled and drank and laughed above the beautiful music, and several couples assayed a waltz before the dais. I squinted, becoming desperate to catch a glimpse of my comrades, and still couldn't pick them out of the moiling crowd. I swayed as the blood rushed from my head and there were two, no, three, Conrad Paxton's seated in the gathering gloom, faces obscured except for the glinting eyes narrowed in curiosity, the curve of a sardonic smile. "Why would they lie?" I said. "What's in it for them?"

Paxton rose and made as if to take my elbow to steady me, although if I crashed to earth, there wasn't much chance the bony bastard would be able to do more than slow my fall. Much as Blackwood had done, he hesitated and then edged away toward the threshold of the French doors that let into a study, abruptly loath to touch me. "You are unwell. Come inside away from the heat and the noise."

"Hands off. I asked a question."

"My destruction is their motivation and ultimate goal. Each for his or her personal reason. The sorcerer desires the secrets within my vault: the cases of photographic plates, the reels, a life's work. Father's store of esoteric theory. Helios Augustus can practically taste the wickedness that broods there, black as a tanner's chimney. Eadweard's macabre films caused quite a stir in certain circles. They suggest great depths of depravity, of a dehumanizing element inherent in photography. A property of anti-life."

"You're pulling my leg. That's—"

"Preposterous? Absurd? Any loonier than swearing your life upon a book that preaches of virgin births and wandering Jews risen from the grave to spare the world from blood and thunder and annihilation?"

"I've lapsed," I said.

"The magician once speculated to me that he had a plan to create moving images that would wipe minds clean and imprint upon them all manner of base, un-sublimated desires. The desire to bow and scrape, to lick the boots of an overlord. It was madness, yet appealing. How his face animated when he mused on the spectacle of thousands of common folk streaming from theatres, faces slack with lust and carnal hunger. For the magician, Eadweard's lost work is paramount. My enemies want the specimens as yet

hidden from the academic community, the plates and reels whispered of in darkened council chambers."

"That what the crones want too? To see a black pope in the debauched Vatican, and Old Scratch on the throne?"

"No, no, those lovelies have simpler tastes. They wish to devour the souls my father supposedly trapped in his pictures. So delightfully primitive to entertain the notion that film can steal our animating force. Not much more sophisticated than the tribals who believe you mustn't point at another person, else they'll die. Eadweard was many, many things, and many of them repugnant. He was not, however, a soul taker. Soul taking is a myth with a single exception. There is but One and that worthy needs no aperture, no lens, no box.

"Look here, John: thaumaturgy, geomancy, black magic, all that is stuff and nonsense, hooey, claptrap, if you will. Certainly, I serve the master and attend Black Mass. Not a thing to do with the supernatural, I'm not barmy. It's a matter of philosophy, of acclimating oneself to the natural forces of the world and the universe. Right thinking, as it were. Ask me if Satan exists, I'll say yes and slice a virgin's throat in the Dark Lord's honor. Ask me if I believe He manipulates and rewards, again yes. Directly? Does He imbue his acolytes with the power of miracles as Helios Augustus surely believes, as the crones believe their old gods do? I will laugh in your face. Satan no more interferes in any meaningful way than God does. Which is to say, by no discernible measure."

"Color me relieved. Got to admit, the old magician almost had my goat. I thought there might be something to all this horseshit mumbo-jumbo."

"Of course, mysticism was invented for the peasantry. You are far out of your depth. You are being turned like a card between masters. The Ace of Clubs. In all of this you are but a blunt instrument. If anyone murdered your father, it was Helios Augustus. Likely by poison. Poison and lies are the sorcerer's best friends."

I took the blackened cocoon from my shirt pocket. So trivial a thing, so withered a husk, yet even as I brandished it between thumb and forefinger, my host shrank farther away until he'd stepped into the house proper and regarded me from the sweep of a velvet curtain, drawn across his face like a

cowl or a cape, and for an instant the ice in my heart suggested that it was a trick, that he was indeed the creature of a forsaken angel, that he meant to lull me into complacency and would then laugh and devour me, skin, bones, and soul. Beneath the balcony the music changed; it sizzled and snapped and strange guttural cries and glottal croaks resounded here and there.

A quick glance, no more, but plenty for me to take it in—the guests were *all* pairing now, and many had already removed their clothes. The shorn and scorched patches of bare earth farther out hadn't suffered from the ravages of ponies or cleats. Servants were not reapplying chalk lines; it must've been pitch in their buckets, for one knelt and laid a torch down and flames shot waist high and quickly blossomed into a series of crisscross angles of an occult nature. The mighty pentagram spanned dozens of yards and it shed a most hellish radiance, which I figured was the point of the exercise. Thus, evidently, was the weekly spectacle at the Paxton estate.

"Don't look so horrified, it's not as if they're going to rut in the field," Paxton said from the safety of the door. "Granted, a few might observe the rituals. The majority will dance and make merry. Harmless as can be. I hadn't estimated you for a prude."

My hand came away from my side wet. I drew the Luger. "I don't care whether they fuck or not," I said, advancing until I'd backed him further into the study. It was dim and antiquated as could be expected. A marble desk and plush chairs, towering stacks of leathery tomes accessed by a ladder on a sliding rail. Obscured by a lush, ornamental tree was a dark statue of a devil missing its right arm. The horned head was intact, though, and its hollow eyes reminded me of the vacuous gaze of the boy in Muybridge's film. "No one is gonna hear it when I put a bullet in you. No one is gonna weep, either. You're not a likeable fella, Mr. Paxton."

"You aren't the first the sorcerer has sent to murder me. He's gathered so many fools over the years, sent them traipsing to their doom. Swine, apes, rodents. Whatever dregs take on such work, whatever scum stoop to such dirty deeds. I'm exhausted. Let this be the end of the tedious affair."

"I'm here for revenge," I said. "My heart is pure." I shot him in the gut.

"The road to Hell, etcetera, etcetera." Paxton slumped against the desk. He painstakingly lighted another cigarette. His silk shirt went black. "Father,

the crones, other, much darker personages who shall remain nameless for both our sakes, had sky high ambitions for me when I was born. That's why I went to a surrogate family while Floddie got shuffled to a sty of an orphanage. It must be admitted that I'm a substantial disappointment. An individual of power, certainly. Still, they'd read the portents and dared hope I would herald a new age, that I would be the chosen one, that I would cast down the tyrants and light the great fires of the end days. Alas, here I dwell, a philosopher hermit, a casual entertainer and dilettante of the left-hand path. I don't begrudge their bitterness and spite. I don't blame them for seeking my destruction. They want someone to shriek and bleed to repay their lost dreams. Who better than the architect of their disillusionment?"

To test my theory that no one would notice, or care, and to change the subject, I shot him again. In the thigh this time.

"See, I told you. I'm but a mortal, and now I die." He sagged to the floor, still clutching his cigarette. His eyes glittered and dripped. "Yes, yes, again." And after he took the third bullet, this one in the ribs an inch or two above the very first, he smiled and blood oozed from his mouth. "Frankly, I thought you'd extort me for money. Or use me to bargain for your friends whom you've so quaintly and clumsily searched for since they wandered away a few minutes ago."

"My friends are dead. Or dying. Probably chained in the cellar getting the Broderick with a hammer. It's what I'd do if I were in your shoes." I grudgingly admired his grit in the face of certain death. He'd a lot more pluck than his demeanor suggested.

"I hope your animal paranoia serves you well all the days of your life. Your friends aren't dead. Nor tortured; not on my account. Although, maybe Daniel wasn't satisfied with one double cross. I suppose it's possible he's already dug a hole for you in the woods. May you be so fortunate." He wheezed and his face drained of color, become gauzy in the dimness. After the fit subsided, he gestured at my chest. "Give me the charm, if you please."

I limped to his side and took the cigarette from him and had a drag. Then I placed the cocoon in his hand. He nodded and more blood dribbled forth as he popped the bits of leaf and silk and chrysalis into his mouth and chewed.

He said, “A fake. What else could it be?” His voice was fading and his head lolled. “If I’d been born the Antichrist, none of this would’ve happened. Anyway… I’m innocent. You’re bound for the fire, big fellow.”

I knelt and grasped his tie to pull him close. “Innocent? The first one was for my dad. Don’t really give a damn whether you done him or not, so I’ll go with what feels good. And this does indeed feel good. The other two were for your sister and that poor sap in boarding school. Probably not enough fire in Hell for you. Should we meet down there? You’d best get shy of me.”

“In a few minutes, then,” Paxton said and his face relaxed. When I let loose of his tie, he toppled sideways and lay motionless. Jeeves, or Reynolds, or whatever the butler’s name was, opened the door and froze in mid-stride. He calmly assessed the situation, turned sharply as a Kraut infantryman on parade, and shut it again.

Lights from the fires painted the window and flowed in the curtains and made the devil statue’s grin widen until everything seemed to warp and I covered my eyes and listened to Dan Blackwood piping and the mad laughter of his thralls. I shook myself and fetched the Thompson and made myself comfortable behind the desk in the captain’s chair, and waited. Smoked half a deck of ciggies while I did.

Betting man that I am, I laid odds that either some random goons, Blackwood, or one of my chums, would come through the door fairly soon, and in that order of likelihood. The universe continued to reveal its mysteries a bit later when Helios Augustus walked in, dressed to the nines in yellow and purple silk, with a stovepipe hat and a black cane with a lump of gold at the grip. He bowed, sweeping his hat, and damn me for an idiot, I should’ve cut him down right then, but I didn’t. I had it in my mind to palaver since it had gone so swimmingly with Paxton.

Bad mistake, because, what with the magician and his expert prestidigitation and such, his hat vanished and he easily produced a weapon that settled my hash. For an instant my brain saw a gun and instinctively my finger tightened on the trigger of the Thompson. Or tried to. Odd, thing, I couldn’t move a muscle, couldn’t so much as bat a lash. My body sat, a big useless lump. I heard and felt everything. No difficulties there, and then I

recognized what Helios had brandished was the mummified severed hand he'd kept in his dressing room at the Hotel Broadsword. I wondered when he'd gotten into town. Had Blackwood dialed him on the blower this morning? The way things were going, I half suspected the creepy bastard might've hidden in the shrubbery days ago and waited, patient as a spider, for this, his moment of sweet, sweet triumph.

That horrid, preserved hand, yet clutching a fat black candle captivated me… I knew from a passage of a book on folklore, read to me by some chippie I humped in college, that what I was looking at must be a hand of glory. Hacked from a murderer and pickled for use in the blackest of magic rituals. I couldn't quite recall what it was supposed to do, exactly. Paralyzing jackasses such as myself, for one, obviously.

"Say, Johnny, did Conrad happen to tell you where he stowed the key to his vault?" The magician was in high spirits. He glided toward me, waltzing to the notes of Blackwood's flute.

I discovered my mouth was in working order. I coughed to clear my throat. "Nope," I said.

He nodded and poured himself a glass of sherry from a decanter and drank it with relish. "Indeed, I imagine this is the blood of my foes."

"Hey," I said. "How'd you turn the Blackwood Boys anyhow?"

"Them? The boys are true believers, and with good reason considering who roams the woods around here. I got my hands on a film of Eadweard's, one that might've seen him burned alive even in this modern age. In the film, young Conrad and some other nubile youths were having congress with the great ram of the black forest. Old Bill stepped from the grove of blood and took a bow. I must confess, it was a spectacular bit of photography. I informed the boys that instead of hoarding Muybridge's genius for myself, it would be share and share alike. Dan and his associates were convinced."

"I'm sorry I asked."

"Does everyone beg you for mercy at the end?"

"The ones who see it coming."

"Do you ever grant quarter?"

"Nope."

“Will *you* beg me for mercy?”

“Sure, why not?”

The magician laughed and snapped his fingers. “Alas! Alack! I would spare you, for sentimental reasons, and because I was such a cad to send the Long and the Short gunning for you, and to curse Donald purely from spite. Unfortunately, ’tis Danny of the Blackwood who means to skin you alive on a corroded altar to Old Bill. Sorry, lad. Entertaining as I’m sure that will prove, I’m on a mission. You sit tight, Uncle Phil needs to see to his prize. Thanks oodles, boy. As the heathens and savages are wont to say, you done good.” He ignored the torrent of profanity that I unleashed upon his revelation that he’d killed my father, and casually swirled his elegant cape around his shoulders and used my own matches to strike a flame to the black candle. Woe and gloom, it was a macabre and chilling sight, that flame guttering and licking at dead fingers as he thrust it forth as a torch.

Helios Augustus proved familiar with the layout. He promptly made an adjustment to the devil statue and ten feet away one of the massive bookcases pivoted to reveal a steel door, blank save for a keyhole. The magician drew a deep breath and spent several minutes chanting in Latin or Greek, or bits of both and soon the door gave way with a mere push from his index finger. He threw back his head and laughed. I admit, that sound was so cold and diabolical if I’d been able to piss myself right then, I would’ve. Then he wiped his eyes and disappeared into a well of darkness and was gone for what felt like an age.

I spent the duration listening to the Blackwood Boys reciting an opera while straining with all of my might and main to lift my hand, turn my head, wiggle a toe, to no avail. This reminded me, most unpleasantly, of soldiers in France I’d seen lying trussed up in bandages at the hospital, the poor bastards unable to blink as they rotted in their ruined bodies. I sweated and tried to reconcile myself with an imminent fate worse than death, accompanied by death. ‘Hacked to pieces by a band of hillbilly satanists’ hadn’t ever made my list of imagined ways of getting rubbed out—and as the Samurai warriors of yore meditated on a thousand demises, I too had imagined a whole lot of ways of kicking.

Helios Augustus's candle flame flickered in the black opening. He carried a satchel and it appeared heavily laden by its bulges; doubtless stuffed with Eadweard Muybridge's priceless lost films. He paused to set the grisly hand in its sconce before me on the desk. The candle had melted to a blob of shallow grease. It smelled of burnt human flesh, which I figured was about right. Probably baby fat, assuming my former chippie girlfriend was on the money in her description.

Helios said, "Tata, lad. By the by, since you've naught else to occupy you, it may be in order to inspect this talisman more closely. I'd rather thought you might twig to my ruse back in Olympia. You're a nice boy, but not much of a detective, sorry to say." He waved cheerily and departed.

I stared into the flame and thought murderous thoughts and a glint on the ring finger arrested my attention. The ring was slightly sunken into the flesh, and that's why I hadn't noted it straight away. My father's wedding band. Helios Augustus, that louse, that conniving, filthy sonofawhore, had not only murdered my father by his own admission, but later defiled his grave and chopped off his left hand to make a grotesque charm.

Rage had a sobering effect upon me. The agony from my wounds receded, along with the rising panic at being trapped like a rabbit in a snare and my brain ticked along its circuit, methodical and accountant-like. It occurred to me that despite his callous speech, the magician might've left me a chance, whether intentionally or as an oversight, the devil only knew. I huffed and puffed and blew out the candle, and the invisible force that had clamped me in its vise evaporated. Not one to sit around contemplating my navel, nor one to look askance at good fortune, I lurched to my feet and into action.

I took a few moments to set the curtains aflame, fueling the blaze with the crystal decanter of booze. I wrapped Dad's awful hand in a kerchief and jammed it into my pocket. Wasn't going to leave even this small, gruesome remnant of him in the house of Satan.

An excellent thing I made my escape when I did, because I met a couple of Blackwood's boys on the grand staircase. "Hello, fellas," I said, and sprayed them with hellfire of my own, sent them tumbling like Jack and Jill down the steps, notched the columns and the walls with bullet holes. I exulted at their destruction. My hand didn't bother me a whit.

Somebody, somewhere, cut the electricity and the mansion went dark as a tomb except for the fire licking along the upper reaches of the balcony and the sporadic muzzle flashes of my trench broom, the guns of my enemies, for indeed those rat bastards, slicked and powdered for the performance, yet animals by their inbred faces and bestial snarls, poured in from everywhere and I was chivvied through the foyer and an antechamber where I swung the Thompson like a fireman with a hose. When the drum clicked empty I dropped the rifle and jumped through the patio doors in a crash of glass and splintered wood, and loped, dragging curtains in my wake, across the lawn for the trees. I weaved between the mighty lines of the burning pentagrams that now merely smoldered, and the trailing edge of my train caught fire and flames consumed the curtains and began eating their way toward me, made me Blake's dread tyger zigzagging into the night, enemies in close pursuit. Back there in the yard echoed a chorus of screams as the top of the house bloomed red and orange and the hillbillies swarmed after me, small arms popping and cracking and it was just like the war all over again.

The fox hunt lasted half the night. I blundered through the woods while the enemy gave chase, and it was an eerie, eerie several hours as Dan Blackwood's pipe and his cousins' fiddle and banjo continued to play and they drove me through briar and marsh and barbwire fence until I stumbled across a lonely dirt road and stole a farm truck from behind a barn and roared out of the Hollow, skin intact. Didn't slow down until the sun crept over the horizon and I'd reached the Seattle city limits. The world tottered and fell on my head and I coasted through a guardrail and came to a grinding halt in a field, grass scraping against the metal of the cab like a thousand fingernails. It got hazy after that.

Dick sat by my bedside for three days. He handed me a bottle of whiskey when I opened my eyes. I expressed surprise to find him among the living, convinced as I'd been that he and Bly got bopped and dumped in a shallow grave. Turned out Bly had snuck off with some patrician's wife and had a hump in the bushes while Dick accidentally nodded off under a tree. Everything was burning and Armageddon was in full swing when they

came to, so they rendezvoused and did the smart thing—sneaked away with tails between legs.

Good news was, Mr. Arden wanted us back in Olympia soonest; he'd gotten into a dispute with a gangster in Portland. Seemed that all was forgiven in regard to my rubbing out the Long and the Short. The boss needed every gun in his army.

Neither Dick nor the docs ever mentioned the severed hand in my pocket. It was missing when I retrieved my clothes and I decided to let the matter drop. I returned to Olympia and had a warm chat with Mr. Arden and everything was peaches and cream. The boss didn't even ask about Vernon. Ha!

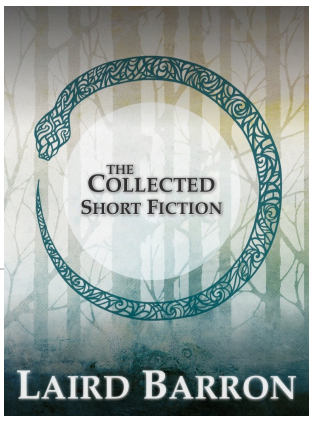
He sent me and a few of the boys to Portland with a message for his competition. I bought a brand spanking new Chicago-typewriter for the occasion. I also stopped by the Broadsword where the manager, after a little physical persuasion, told me that Helios Augustus had skipped town days prior on the Starlight Express, headed to California, if not points beyond. Yeah, well, revenge and cold dishes, and so forth. Meanwhile, I'd probably avoid motion pictures and stick to light reading.

During the ride to Portland, I sat in back and watched the farms and fields roll past and thought of returning to Ransom Hollow with troops and paying tribute to the crones and the Blackwood Boys; fantasized of torching the entire valley and its miserable settlements. Of course, Mr. Arden would never sanction such a drastic engagement. That's when I got to thinking that maybe, just maybe I wasn't my father's son, maybe I wanted more than a long leash and a pat on the head. Maybe the leash would feel better in my fist. I chuckled and stroked the Thompson lying across my knees.

"Johnny?" Dick said when he glimpsed my smile in the rearview.

I winked at him and pulled my Homburg down low over my eyes and had a sweet dream as we approached Portland in a black cloud like angels of death.

Gamma



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My dad shot a horse when I was a boy. The horse, a young sorrel mare named Gamma, slipped and fell while fording a creek way up in the Talkeetna Mountains. Dad had packed her saddle too heavily with supplies. I *knew* the load was too much when he was piling it on, as if we were heading for fucking Mt. Denali, but I was a coward and didn't say anything, not a damned thing. Dad scared me. He had to cut the straps off with a Barlow knife as the mare thrashed in the frigid water, and sprayed them in mud and twigs and piss.

Come on, girl, he'd muttered through his teeth as she fought. My god, she fought. *Come on, baby. You're okay, you're all right*. He danced at the end of the halter lead, a goddamned acrobat dodging those flying hooves. A bearded ballerina in a drover's hat and cowboy boots, shotgun slapping against his back as he leaped and capered. His antics were so hilarious that I laughed through the tears.

Gamma scrambled to her feet again, but, after that, she was never quite right, never quite the same. As summer wore on toward autumn, her health declined and she became sickly and weak. Her left eye went milky and her bones jutted. She stopped swishing the flies with her tail when they gathered in clusters upon her haunches. She stood in place for hours, muzzle in the mud.

One morning, Dad shrugged on his jacket and took down the big lever action rifle. He went into the barn and looped a rope around Gamma's neck and led her down the trail to a secluded spot and blew her brains out. I heard the shot, muffled through the log walls, from my bunk. He walked back into our homely cabin and put the carbine in its rack above the dining table. He sat without speaking at the table, waiting for his breakfast.

Mom poured him a cup of coffee and fried some of her world-famous pancakes. With blueberries she'd stashed in the root cellar. Fresh fruit was a cause for celebration at the ol' homestead, let me tell you. I recall being so grateful that I licked my plate clean. Like a dog.

If Flatworm B eats Flatworm A, Flatworm B will inherit everything Flatworm A knew. Even Snopes is on the fence when it comes to debunking this theory. But look. When I speak *of when*, I mean now. There has always been and will only ever be the now. After the rats and the cockroaches succumb, there's another order in the wings. Of course, eventually, there won't be any carbon-based life on Terra, even the teeny fibroid shit that exists inside volcanic vents at the bottom of the sea.

Meanwhile. It's not just the flatworms; it's everything. Gimme a tomahawk, hell, a flat rock, and I'll show you.

About one hundred and eighty-thousand years ago, a hominid slunk into a cave and murdered its brother with a spear of spruce wood, fire-hardened at the tip. The death scream echoed from the cave mouth and the birds in the trees began to chatter.

For reasons unknown, the murderer elected to remain in the darkness. Carrion eaters stayed away. *Everything* that walked or crawled stayed away. A vast and fecund mushroom bed existed within the depths, a portion extending unto the surface world in the manner of a gray tongue drooling from a slack jaw. In the hooting, glottal proto-language of the hominids, the cave was referred to as a cursed place. Eventually, an earthquake happened and the mountainside closed in on itself.

Thank you, great worm that encircles all creation.

I eat pancakes, drive a Toyota, go hiking along nature trails. Camping at night in the wild, doing for pleasure what my ancestors did from necessity, I tell myself that stars are clouds of flaming gas, not the eyes of the old gods peeping through a black tapestry.

I tell myself a lot of shit.

I met Erin while attending college at the University of Washington. She worked part-time at the Saturn Theater. Blonde, blue-eyed Norwegian honey with dazzling white teeth and a penchant for Catholic-school-girl skirts. She smiled at me a couple of times as I shuffled past the ticket booth and, eventually, I worked up the nerve to ask her out. We fucked on the third date and the next morning went to breakfast at that little greasy spoon that used to be on the corner of 4th and Payne. Ruby's Grille and Disco. The disco bit was just pre-hipster humour.

We ordered blueberry pancakes with blueberry syrup, if I recall correctly. The café became a weekly hangout. After we got hitched and moved to Olympia, I still took Erin there every spring, on the anniversary of our first date.

A couple of years ago, I read in the paper that the frumpy, dumpy teen waitress who served us in the old days got murdered. An exchange student who came in for hash and coffee each and every goddamned morning developed an unrequited crush on her. The guy was a math whiz from Vietnam. His family pawned their souls to ship him stateside for a shot at the major leagues. He tracked the waitress to her house and chloroformed her when she answered the door. Supposedly, her choking to death was an accident. The guy decided not to face the music and snuffed himself in the back of the patrol car with a baggie of chemicals he'd stashed in his sock.

Ruby's went under with the recession, so I didn't have to make an excuse to Erin why we went elsewhere to celebrate our happy day.

Gamma died in a hollow. Scraggly spruce trees laced in black moss tangled together like teeth, marshy ground, stagnant water. A breeding pit for mosquitoes and gnats. Winter had come and gone. The birds and the flies and the worms had come and gone. All that remained of her were bones encrusted with verdigris mold sunk in the muck of a mushroom bed. Some of the mushrooms billowed as tall as my thigh.

Not sure what drew me there months after Dad killed her. I remember sitting in the shadows of the trees, as summer sweltered the mountainside,

and I remember the hum of a light aircraft traversing the eastern sky. I remember thinking Gamma's skull was an abandoned palace of the ants, a museum of toadstools. I hadn't read any Baudelaire, but, wow, fuck, it would've resonated, would've blown apart my brain, just like Gamma.

What I couldn't grasp, or didn't want to, was that there were too many bones in that pile. The moss and the fungus obscured the mess, but, down deep, I knew the shape was wrong, knew I'd stumbled upon a dreadful secret, and I decided to play dumb.

The moss rippled and the ferns shushed with a passing breeze that warbled, flute-like, through Gamma's eye sockets, while the gray and black and yellow-capped mushrooms dripped and oozed. The mushrooms whispered to me.

Fact or fiction: In 1951 the CIA secretly poisoned a village in France with a hallucinogenic fungus. The Company was interested in studying the effects of pharmacological mind control in the field. Some villagers died; others were sent to asylums due to lunacy. A royal fustercluck, as my grandma would've said.

Fiction. The CIA had its hands full developing a smallpox delivery mechanism at the time. Yes, mind control and pharmacology were the original hot topics down at R&D, as the MKULTRA project testifies. Yes, there was a fungus involved and, yes, numerous villagers went berserk. However, it was simply a batch of bad bread that gummed the works. The baker's snot-nosed assistant fell asleep at the wheel, as it were. Blame him. Not the CIA and certainly not H.P's bat-winged pals from icy Yuggoth. Pay no attention to rumours about them. No government has ever made contact with an alien species, much less colluded with it regarding human experiments. It was the baker's apprentice in the mill with a sack of moldy flour.

Moving along, moving along.

For a while among certain fringe circles, the Cordyceps discovery got scientists' hearts all fluttery. "The zombie fungus," some called it. It hailed from before the days of the trilobite. Method of proliferation was to zap various insect species with spores, ants being the most infamous example until late in the 21st century, when a rather horrible discovery was made at a monastery in northern Italy. Anyway, the lunatic fringe suggested doomsday might come in the form of a sporulating organism awakened from hibernation, or worse, adapted by one pharmaceutical company or another for military or private sector application.

The nutters were wrong about poor, innocent Cordyceps, but they had basically the right idea.

Lake Vostok was the epicenter of the latest and greatest extinction event to visit the planet. You know, the lake far beneath Antarctic ice sheets at the quaintly dubbed "Pole of Cold", where the Soviets built a station, back when there were real live Soviets. Vostok Station. The Soviets stuck it out there and, after they left, the Russians got ambitious and started digging and digging. No money for bread, no money for car fuel, but plenty of rubles for military adventures and boondoggle science projects that included digging.

Into the ice.

That ice is thousands of years old near the surface and it just gets older until you reach bottom and there's a big, prehistoric lake teeming with… life. What kind of life? Oh, don't be coy, motherfucker. You know what kind.

The ha-ha part is, that "hypothetical" rogue star would've done the job down the road when it kicked loose that planet-killer asteroid and sent her tumbling our way. Every twenty-six million years. Look at the Yucatan; look at the *Grande Coupure*. Just look. Every twenty six-million years. Like a clock. Goodbye, lizards great and small; goodbye fish; goodbye, you little troublemaking primates. Goodbye.

Except, it wasn't, isn't, goodbye this time around. It was hello, baby. The living and the dead and those in between all merged. Separation no longer exists. Gives the old phrase "stuck on you" an entirely fresh definition. May as well resign myself to my new niche on the food chain. I got the feeling nothing is going to change until Nemesis swings by again.

Contrary to Mama's predictions, I didn't die in a hail of bullets.

My wife, I forget her name, slept with an English teacher at her school and decided he was an upgrade. She patted me on the hand and said, *Sayonara, sucker*, or words to that effect. I left my happy suburban home and wandered the world for a while. It didn't cure my ills.

I read about this poor bastard over in Germany. He was so depressed that he answered a personal ad from a psycho killer who was looking for a willing victim. The depressed guy went to the psycho's apartment and played the role of sacrificial lamb. A few glasses of burgundy laced with sedatives and Depressed Dude was unconscious. The psycho cut his guest's throat and cooked the muscle of his shoulder for supper. Yeah, there was some sick, insane shit for you. But, but… in the end, I sort of got where the depressed guy was coming from. The urge to self-annihilate occasionally overwhelms the best of us. Exhibit A: the atom bomb. Exhibit B: love.

Dad and Mom had moved on to greener pastures when I was still a teenager. Upon my return as a middle-aged wreck, I discovered our homestead in the mountains had fallen to ruin. Roof caved in, yard overgrown. Nobody went up there into our private valley. It surprised me how easy Gamma's death hollow was to find and how little it had changed relative to the obliteration of Dad's handiwork and the nearly-erased trails that led there.

My God, my God, the bones, or *some* bones, remained in a calcified pile, webbed in a strange skein of blue and yellow that clung to everything, dripped from the branches of the trees. Those mushrooms were bigger than ever—cyclopean giants the girth of my torso that oozed dark sap. Thousands of insects and birds and squirrels were embedded in the webbing, the stalks of the towering fungi. Mummified, slightly shriveled.

The horror I felt was surpassed by a crushing sense of inevitability, of *rightness*. I hadn't come home with the conscious intent of suicide, so I hadn't brought a proper tool. No gun, no knife, no rope. When I tore a spruce branch from its trunk and rammed the jagged tip through my chest, I was very much taken by surprise. I collapsed into the bed of slime and

muck, and waited for the agony to be replaced by the smooth, eggshell perfection of the void of death.

The creeping appetite of that wilderness grave subsumed me over a span of decades. I remember every moment. Although, I am frequently confused. Instead of skewering myself with a homemade spear, I am staring down the barrel of my father's rifle and into his cold, dead eyes as he squeezes the trigger.

If visitors should arrive here from some distant constellation, they will find this a quiet, peaceful place. Nothing stirs except the water and the wind, the fronds and the blades and the stems of the plants and the fungi that cover everything from sea to scummy sea, from polar cap to polar cap. If the visitors are smart—and, surely, to travel so far from home, they will be quite advanced—their equipment will safeguard them from spores and pollen and the crawling molds that have become ubiquitous. However, I doubt such visitors will ever become aware of me trapped in eternal amber, peeping at them from every keyhole, from every nightmare version of a sundew, a redcap, a pitcher plant. I doubt they will detect that the hiss of the grass, the drip-drop of sap, are the outward expressions of my cries of lament. They will gather their samples and mine their data, and leave, never guessing they've trod, not a graveyard, but Sheol itself. I will watch them depart and I will not twitch, no matter my anguish. I am in hell.

And by *I*, I mean *we*.

The Light Is The Darkness

This version taken from *The Light Is The Darkness*, 2012
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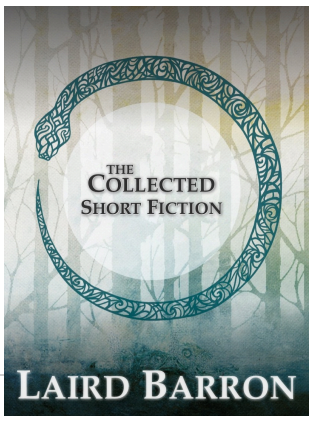

Chapter One

1

After Conrad followed yet another dead end sighting of Imogene, he'd exhausted most of his cash and all his favors. His sister's trail of bloody breadcrumbs vanished into a South American rainforest. Imogene, a crackerjack FBI special agent, had originally disappeared in Mexico several years beforehand while hunting Dr. Drake, the fellow who may or may not have murdered their older brother Ezra.

That most authorities took Drake's decade long absence as proof of death (he'd been older than the oldest Nazi war criminals last anyone saw him in public), hadn't dissuaded Imogene from her mission of vengeance. She'd believed the doctor possessed great and diabolical secrets, an unnatural lifespan being least among these.

Brother dead, suspect missing, sister missing too. Gears within gears, wheels within wheels, irony piled upon irony. Lately, Conrad wasn't sure whether he was chasing Imogene or her ghost.

The only good thing to come from months spent chopping through the jungle between backwater villages was the discovery of yet another in a sequence of cached papers and films Imogene periodically dropped for him like clues in a bizarre game of cat and mouse. These latest papers were left tucked inside a firebombed bunker and revealed her recent contact with another family acquaintance he'd long thought dead or relocated beyond the reach of friend and foe alike: Pablo Souza, known internationally as the

Brazilian, a chemist and surgeon of some infamy and a former henchman of Dr. Drake.

Rumor had it, and a hasty note among the top secret military documents she'd stolen confirmed, Imogene had sought Souza out to purchase a serum the old man perfected, an elixir that contained most wondrous and potentially lethal properties—*One drop will grant you immortality unless it strikes you stone dead!* The alleged properties were so wondrous they'd attained the stature of legend.

Imogene's note read in part: *I know where Drake is hiding. Problem is, you can't get there from here. Souza gave us a way in, though. The kicker is, Souza's little wonder drug isn't what made Dr. D. an ageless villain. Turns out it's the other way around. But, daylight is burning and I have to make tracks. So, this is it, brother of mine. I'm gonna eat the worm and shed this skin. Raul is coming with. Final showdown on eleven at eleven. Don't try to follow us. Love you, kiddo.* The Raul she mentioned was Raul Lorca, a decorated Mexican scientist and Imogene's lover of several years. Her loyal sidekick. Mexican intelligence had a few questions for him too.

Unfortunately, Imogene was long, long gone and the Brazilian skipped the country just ahead of Conrad's arrival, although as more than one law enforcement agency wanted Souza's head on a pole for various crimes against humanity dating back to the Second Great War, his latest absence might've been a coincidence. The old boy tended to move frequently. As for Souza's miracle elixir: those in the know scoffed and dismissed the existence of the drug as a fairytale, mythical as Ponce de Leone's fountain. Conrad didn't care about the skeptics. Good enough for Imogene was good enough for him, and either way, Souza was another link in the chain that would help him locate his sister for a homecoming or a funeral.

Conrad put out the word he was now looking for the Brazilian in addition to Imogene and her lover. Tracking the chemist would be expensive, if not impossible. Luckily, Conrad's membership in the Pageant, while exceedingly hazardous, rewarded him well. He made the call to his patron, a reclusive industrialist named Cyrano Kosokian, and scheduled a ludus with a top ranked contender. They would fight that coming spring in a crater in the desert. The terms were particularly brutal—a blood match unto dismemberment or death—and thus the payout extravagant. Sufficiently

lucrative, he hoped, to ameliorate the massive debts he was in the midst of accruing in search of Imogene. Then he chartered a flight to a remote Polynesian island resort and dropped off the map for a while.

He thought of it as returning to the nest.

The resort was contained within the shell of a ruined castle on a hill above a white beach. It loomed over a jetty, a handful of antiquated fishing boats, and farther out, at the mouth of the harbor, a reef. During the winter season the resort was deserted but for a skeleton staff and a handful of fellow eccentrics.

Conrad practically owned the place. The resort was scarcely upscale, being rather an ancient church converted to a fortification against buccaneers, and, during one of the government's more prosperous and ambitious eras, remodeled as a hotel casino meant to attract the big fish: filthy rich Americans and Euro nobility seeking anonymous escape from the paparazzi. The dingy façade, weedy courtyard, two hundred year old clay tiles that let in the rain, the moss and the cracked plaster, yellow as decayed ivory, the sullen employees, and the occasional cockroach, combined and collaborated to lend the villa an aura of Third World charm.

The owners were proud of their erstwhile clientele. Dim photographs of decrepit Hollywood celebrities, Vegas singers, 1980s supermodels, and a famous Latin dictator, glinted in the lobby, the dining room and the lounge. The stars grinned and grimaced, were mainly ghosts, unknown to the bartenders and the boys who carefully swept the floors.

In the mornings while the sky was yet dark, Conrad dressed in the rubber suit with its leaden patches and weights at wrists, waist and ankles, and ran along the beach until he came to the mountain path and followed it up and up above the tree line, across the black shale slopes and gaspingly at last until he fell to his knees in the shadow of the caldera of a dead volcano.

Come the tourist season the mountainside would be strewn with panting men in flowery shirts and sunburned women in floppy-brim hats and starlet sunglasses the natives sold by the gross alongside keychains, pottery and bananas at the little thatch stands on every other corner. But this was winter and the mountain was peaceful as westerly light began to bleed across the ocean. Conrad sprawled among the small stones and powdered ash and

when his air returned, lurched to his feet and plunged back down toward the trees and the beach that slashed like a white scar.

The staff, a cadre of dark, pinch-mouthed men in secondhand tuxedos, lugged a buffet bar into the courtyard. There he collapsed beneath a faded parasol and gorged on slabs of boar and goat, bread and cheese, and gallons of goat's milk while a servant in a dirty white jacket waited at his elbow to pour his coffee and light his cigarettes. The cigarettes were killing him, he knew. Gravity was killing him, and diffidence too, and someone, somewhere was waiting to kill him if these things failed. In contemplation, he'd have another smoke.

Conrad always slept for several hours. Later, in the early afternoon of even-numbered days, he went to a section of the beach where old rockslides had deposited boulders among the shade of the palms, and lifted the smallest of these rocks in his arms and lumbered to the surf and tossed them into the bay. He persisted mechanically until a trench gouged the sand and the skin on his arms glistened slick with blood and he could no longer grasp the boulders, could scarcely stand.

Odd days he swam from the jetty through the shallow harbor past the breakers until the water cooled and darkened beneath his threshing limbs. On the way home he pushed harder, harder, put the hammer down and drove balls out, held nothing in reserve. Occasionally, his body became lead and he sank in the greenish lagoon near the shore, plunged like a statue, trailing his life-breath in a streamer of oblong bubbles, sank toward the hermit crabs and the coral and algae scabbed rocks. Three of the more reliable natives, the ones he reckoned with the least hatred toward white men and Americans in particular, who were paid quite handsomely to sit and observe these solitary excursions, eventually set aside their shared flask of coconut rum, clamped hand-rolled cigarettes in their teeth and poled a skiff alongside and hooked Conrad's limp bulk with gaffs. They towed him to the docks where two more fishermen waited to roll him onto his face until the water ran from his lungs and he coughed his way back among the living. Slowly, laboriously, as Conrad weighed something on the scale of a small walrus, they loaded him into a cart and pushed him up the hill and to his quarters for another long nap.

Upon emerging, torpid and semi-feral, he'd feast again and gulp prodigious quantities of local wine from earthen jugs. Strange, leering visages were carved into the jugs. Conrad had seen many of these in various forms stacked on the hotel's storeroom shelves, the rude pantries of the shacks and shanties—always well hidden from the casual inspection of the rapacious tourists and their cameras and video recorders. The concierge, a smooth, walnut fellow named Ricardo, because his mother originally emigrated from Madrid where she'd been an actress of minor accomplishment, informed Conrad that an old family of master potters made the jugs. The jugs were good for trapping the power of spirits if one knew the proper incantations. The family was scattered across the islands and had faded into obscurity around the time most of the population converted to Christianity. Old ways never really died and the spirit jugs gradually reappeared during the empty winter months along with the traditional fertility charms and clay idols of elephantine creatures squatting upon thrones of skulls, and shark-headed humanoids whose faces were obliterated by the slow burn of centuries. Effigies of dark gods, the concierge said. Makers and destroyers according to their whims.

Conrad awakened occasionally to flickering orange shadows upon the ceiling; sing-song chants, the strident melody of reed pipes, the rhythmic ka-thud of drums. From his balcony he watched the sinuous roil and flare of bonfires among the monoliths embedded in the black line of foothills. After a time he returned to bed, sometimes dreaming of men in masks and headdresses assembled in the hotel lobby, their eyes turned upward and boring through the floor of his room. Spearheads sparked and glinted in the dimness; machetes clinked and scraped against wooden harnesses of war.

The weeks lay before and behind him, an endless white waste.

No matter the day, as dusk began to press the sun against the waves, Conrad dragged a wagon to a cane field behind the resort. He'd unload his weapons and get down to business. The light work first—he flung a brace of javelins into sacks of straw tied to rickety bamboo cross posts; first right-handed, then left, mostly at close range, but sometimes as distant as one hundred paces, which was too far to be considered effective as a general rule; and after the javelins came the sling and he hurled smooth, gray river

stones and watched straw puff as from bullet holes and he continued until his shoulders ached.

By then, night fastened upon the land. Fortunately, there on the coast the starry sky hung within a hand-span of the earth. It was never truly dark. He'd practice with the heavy weapons: chains, mauls, the Visigoth axes, the great iron mace from Mongolia with its iron head and flanges that shrieked as he swung at the bamboo thickets and splintered the smaller trees, made vees of them like a swath of broken toothpicks; and as he chopped, his feet moved in the katas of feudal samurai, side to side and diagonal; and older steps, the berserker rush of the Vikings and the Gauls. He ravaged through the copses in brief charges of the Roman cohorts and the implacable Spartans, until, at last it was done and the steam rolled from him in clouds.

After supper he broiled in the sauna and then off to his suite to brood over a collection of cryptic papers assembled from the dusty shelves and trunks of antiquarian bibliophiles from Alaska to Katmandu, or set up the antique projector and meditate upon the kaleidoscopic horror show spun from a film reel he'd found among his long lost sister's effects, all the while repeating one of several mnemonic triggers that would alter his brainwaves and open a door to elsewhere, wherever that might be. From the glimpses of bloody bones and colloidal darkness, he wondered if it might not be Hell itself.

He doggedly awaited some sign of apprehended knowledge, a stirring of the atavistic consciousness. Occasionally, shadows and mist coalesced into nightmares of massive tendrils uncoiling from a vast and dreamless void, and visions of antlers and fiery destruction, but none of it made sense except that now, if he concentrated to the point of a violent migraine, he could cause a spoon to vibrate in a bowl by will alone and possibly once he had slightly levitated a few inches above the blanket while in lotus, but he had been drunk, so very drunk.

Such was the daily ritual.

The morning the neurologist landed for a series of scheduled tests, Conrad was on the lounge terrace, sipping the blackest of black coffee and smoking cigarettes. A radical chief of staff at a mainland university paid exorbitant fees for the privilege of monitoring Conrad's unusual brainwaves.

Rains had begun the previous evening. Lightning stabbed at the horizon. A small man in an overcoat exited the plane and one of the attendants held an umbrella for him as they hurriedly made for the hotel. This was Dr. Enn, one of several persons Conrad had contacted to conduct periodic tests of his neurological activity. Soon came a number of trunks and cases, dutifully unloaded by hotel employees and wheeled up the dock on hand trucks.

Two more visitors, heavies in suits and glasses, trailed. The short, thick fellow with the bad 1970s haircut was Agent Marsh. The suave, dark gentleman who looked like he'd strolled off the cover of GQ was Agent Singh. Both worked for American intelligence—the National Security Agency. Conrad suspected he would have to kill them sooner or later. For now it meant he would have to relinquish the papers and film he'd retrieved in Brazil. Simply no time to stash everything. So be it: he'd hand over his curiosities like a good boy and maybe get the operatives to do some digging on his behalf in the bargain.

He finished his cigarette. The island and its routines were the nest. Now he'd crawl back into the egg.

2

He lay suspended beneath miles and miles of blue-black ice and dreamed.

This ice was the oldest kind that had come down from the great outer darkness and closed around the world eons past. Trapped in its glacial folds was a cornucopia of geological oddities: cryptozoic bacteria writ large, fossilized palm fronds of ages when blood-warm oceans and perpetual fog wrapped hemisphere to hemisphere; insects, animals, men, and things that resembled men, but were not, and vast globular superstructures of primordial jelly and miles-long belts of ganglia, all caught fast in glacial webs, all preserved and on exhibit in the gelid recesses of his dreaming brain.

Conrad dreamed of waking, of thawing, which was a reliable indicator that control was shifting his way, that he had swum up from the Hadal depths to a semi-lucid state, and so he blinked away the ice and whispered the Second Word, which was *leviathan*, and was again a child in the backseat of Dad's car. They were in Alaska, hauling ass along the Parks Highway, bound for

Anchorage and the airport. A DC-10 waited to transport them to Spain and the clinic where miracles happened.

Mom and Imogene were somewhere ahead, cutting through arctic twilight in a Citroen with bald tires and a broken heater. Mom was reckless at the wheel, a damn the torpedoes, cry havoc! kind of lady and likely she was puffing a Pall Mall and lecturing hapless Imogene on the essential instability of subatomic matter. Or how the headhunters in Papua, New Guinea performed fertility rituals with the skulls of their victims.

The windows were frosted over, but when Conrad scratched a circle there was Denali rearing in the middle distance, a chunk of red-black rock wearing a frozen halo.

His head ached. It ached all the time those days; ached as if it were he and not brother Ezra being eaten alive by a melanoma the diameter of a mango. Ezra rode shotgun, the metal nub at the crown of his Seattle Mariners baseball hat chattering against the glass. Ezra was the elder; a little league all star shortstop, future hall-of-famer and devoted tormentor of younger siblings, currently under the weather and fading fast. Ezra wasn't much for trapping groundballs or distributing Indian burns these days; he'd withered to skeletal dimensions that Conrad could tuck under one arm.

1980.

This was the year the famous Japanese mountaineer Kojima bought a one-way ticket to visit his ancestors. Kojima wasn't dead yet either; he still had a few hours to watch his extremities freeze, to ponder whatever great men ponder as they wait for the curtain to drop. Kojima had been in the news all week. As they toiled past the shadow of his tomb, Conrad gazed at the storm clouds and tried to touch Kojima's thoughts.

When he asked Dad his opinion, Dad grunted and said mountain climbers were responsible for polluting the wilderness with discarded oxygen bottles and food wrappers, that they were possibly the filthiest creatures alive.

Dad's shoulders were roughly the span of a mattock handle under a plaid coat. He looked like a bison hunched at the wheel, not a lunatic physicist hell bent for leather to the airport. He was a second generation Swede. His own father got bayoneted on an atoll in the sunny South Pacific during

WWII. Dad staunchly refused to drive Japanese imports. Wouldn't touch sushi. He didn't even glance out the window at the mountain.

Conrad realized he was not alone in the backseat. There was an old guy beside him, and he resembled Dad, but much older and dressed in weird clothes, a space suit or something, and he stared at Conrad in a way the boy would grow accustomed to over time. His eyes bled pity. There followed a psychedelic moment like Borges shaking hands with himself. And Conrad knew him because they'd met before. The old man said, *Time is a ring*, then fractured into motes of sparkling dust.

1980, 1980. For Conrad, 1980 was the magic number, albeit in the cursed, black magic sense. Ten years old and on the road to Hell.

The Navarro family shipped off to the Pyrenees and sought a miracle from Dr. Drake in his converted Thirteenth Century Abbey that locals referred to as The Cloister. Over the final months of Ezra's decline, Mom, Dad, Imogene, and Conrad camped in the hostel of Blanco Village a few miles from the base of the mountain retreat and awaited a miracle.

That was a muddy spring and brutal summer. A summer of goats, flies and sluggish, crawling heat fended off with mosquito nets and pails of shaved ice. Sullen locals and ugly foreigners—Americans and Brits, mainly—clumped in the hostel taproom, or loitered near the well house in the village square, pecking each other like pullets in a too-small cage, squabbling over the news casts on the Armed Services Radio Network, the papers that came in the weekly mail run. It was a uniformly mournful time. The Cold War was colder than ever and an American embassy was in the hands of Islamic fundamentalists. Nobody in the village of Blanco seemed overjoyed about *anything* from the muddy roads that ate corduroy for breakfast, to the great louse infestation among the hens, to the low supply of drinkable whiskey in the hostel cellars. One of the Germans even complained publicly and bitterly that the farm girls weren't as free with their charms as peasants in "more civilized" provinces. Tempers ran hot and led to several ungainly, drunken brawls in the damnable mud, although everything was usually patched up with a handshake and a few rounds of cheap booze.

Every day, the family mounted the bus, a relic from WWII, and endured the kidney-crushing trip up the switchback trail. Mom and dad usually sat near

the shipping tycoon from Essex, or, if they were in the mood, exchanged pleasantries with another American couple, vociferous college professors from Madison Wisconsin. Imogene hung around with the youngest daughter of an Austrian diplomat and the pair traded earrings, braided each other's hair and nattered incomprehensibly. Conrad remained apart, stoically regarding the sheer cliffs and smoky ravines beneath the bus wheels, his ears ringing with the girls' false laughter.

In the beginning, the bus was overloaded with patrician families eager to make the daily pilgrimage. As days blurred into weeks and months, more empty seats appeared. New, fresh faces arrived on occasion, cowed into abject timidity by the shopworn expressions of those who remained from the spring. Come the glowering days of late August, Conrad was once more pressed to the edges of a boisterous, sweaty crowd composed of mostly strangers.

Ezra got a little worse each visit and everybody cried and sleepwalked around with red eyes and broken veins in their noses. Mom was the one who kept them together for the most part, diluted the incipient hysteria into a persistent mood of shrill grief, although she was a bag of bones and raw nerves before it was through. She'd taken to arguing with Dad. Not little arguments, either, but real bruisers and they went out into road for the worst of them, stood in the rain and shouted down the thunder.

Mom hated what Dr. Drake and his cronies were doing to Ezra. She wasn't sure precisely *what* they were doing as no one was allowed to see behind the curtain. Drake interacted with the families via intermediaries, a duo of ancient, hook-nosed men who might've been twins with their identically thick Greek accents and dusty suits, their matching expressions of reptilian dispassion. The Greeks didn't give away anything, ever. All anyone really knew about Drake's technique was that it involved hypnotic regression via multiple mediums, and routine injections of an experimental medicine. There were side effects, of course. Pain and suffering. Nightmares and night sweats; exploding neuroses. None of it would've passed muster back in the States, but this was the refuge of last resort.

Mom begged Dad to call it off, to take Ezzy home and let him spend his remaining days in familiar surroundings. He missed his dog, his friends, his roomful of trophies.

Then, one day between summer and autumn, it was time to go.

Mom and Dad lovingly dressed Ezra in his Sunday best, packed his remains in a wooden box and shipped him overseas on a gigantic cargo plane flown by pock-cheeked men in parkas and goggles.

Conrad slept most of the way home across the Atlantic, drugged by growling turbines, the clink and jostle of nets and straps. There had been a funeral, although Conrad didn't recall much, and after the dirt was shoveled on and the adults drowned themselves in alcohol and misery at the reception, nothing else was said. The coffin lid, the book of Ezra, was closed. Well, mom sailed her Supercub into a mountainside the next summer and dad went to pieces, lost his job at Drome Corp. and took a permanent vacation at Grable, the swankiest funny farm west of the Mississippi, and eventually died on the toilet, just like Elvis—*then* the incident was finished.

…The dream skipped forward…

Years later, when they'd grown and shuffled off to their respective colleges, long after Conrad was well on his way to cult fame and ruin and Imogene was a superstar graduate from the university of J.E. Hoover, and they'd reconciled themselves to Dad never getting out of the loony bin, his little sister summoned him for dinner at the Monarch Grill, a hole-in-the-wall they haunted as teenagers. She'd materialized from the midnight blue, smiled that hard, sharp smile of hers and kissed him. Little sister was bittersweet, like gourmet European chocolate. She didn't understand him, didn't respect his choices, considered his shadow-career as a latter-day gladiator a colossal waste of superior genetic material. Her points were well taken—a Navarro was capable of almost anything, even Conrad whose talents ran to the brutish end of the spectrum. Daddy, a physicist cum Olympic caliber power lifter; Mom, a PhD poet and ace pilot; Ezra, the teen baseball star and internationally published essayist.

Conrad could've been an artist, a space shuttle pilot, a decathlon champion, except with advanced degrees in theology and quantum mechanics. Like the rest, he'd excelled at everything he'd attempted. He was stronger than Dad and smarter than Ezra, a million magnifications more artistically gifted than either of them and maybe a bit superior in that department to Imogene.

Imogene was the rapier wit, the pop psychologist and crack shot with any light caliber sidearm, the deductive genius with metaphorical balls of steel.

Imogene had always been the mean one of the bunch, too. She opened up the old wounds with a casual swipe of her claws.

Kill anything interesting lately, bro?

An attack-trained orangutan.

With your bare hands, Tarzan style?

Hell no! Ka-Bar.

Wimp. Why do you pick on poor beasts, huh?

It was gonzo. Spent its whole life in a cage being pumped full of growth hormones and zapped with a cattle prod. The thing wanted to eat my liver.

Good for it!

Hey, it's almost never animals now. I'm in the major leagues. I get to slaughter big, sweaty Turks and axe-wielding Slavs.

Oh my. Clubs and knives, oh, oh—and tridents?

And whips and nets. I crash chariots; the ones with spiked hubs like Kirk Douglas drove. Circus Maximus, sis.

Lucky you. You guys prance around in costumes like Mexican wrestlers, except you try to murder or maim each other.

Yeah.

Who pays for this spectacle? Ever really ponder that one, Connie? Ever think about what sort of people arrange this secret world you star in?

Rich folks.

Guess they'd have to be to recreate Caesar's favorite pastime. That really your kind of crowd? These effete psychos who want to relive the seedier aspects of the Roman empire?

These are the kind of folks who own tropical islands. Hell, some of them run banana republics for fun. They want a spectacle, I can fill the bill.

Ah yes. Dictators, inbred nobility and other megalomaniacs. Swell friends you got there.

It's a living.

Over steak and wine, she played with her knife, which was an unsettling bookend to her smile, and said Ezzy didn't die of cancer. Ezzy was murdered. Drake murdered him, murdered a bunch of people, probably. Why? Because Drake was a devil. Quite possibly, the good doctor was Old Poger himself, horns and tail.

Conrad was unsure how to assimilate this new information. Seeing Sissy was cool, but he had a lot on his plate, what with the strict schedule of arena events and the jet-setting debaucheries accorded a celebrity of his stature; command performances. He nodded and composed a semi-credulous reply that didn't fool either of them.

Imogene was always the smart one of the kids. When it came to Conrad she was practically telepathic. *Fuck it. Forget I said anything. How's your goddamn steak tartare? You eat like an animal. Dress you in some skins, you'd fit right into a cave man exhibit. Fucking troglodyte.*

Genie—

Fuck it, I said. Got any toot? You rich bitches have snow falling out of your pockets, don't you?

Sure. I know a guy, fix us right up.

Conrad lost his appetite. Not much later, he lost his sister too…

3

Mr. Navarro?"

And the dream ended like a soap bubble bursting.

Light—too much, too red—came through the water; then the wavering oval of an elongated face, a blotch of tapestry, the pulsing glow of a slide projector. He sat upright in the great marble tub and gasped. Water streamed from his face and goggles. The goggles had ceased transmitting, but their after-images crackled behind his eyelids, asynchronous to the rapidly shuttering patterns on the white-lit square of wall.

Dr. Enn rose from the table with the complicated recording equipment and brought him a towel and gently retrieved the goggles. Dr. Enn returned to his table, careful not to trip over the loops of wires and plastic cords. Agents

Marsh and Singh lounged across the room, sipping scotch from glasses, the bottle on a small table between them.

The temperature in the room was a balmy eighty degrees, and yet Conrad shivered and his hands were blue. He wiped his face and staggered from the tub to a patio chair and pulled on his flip flops. Conrad was not a tall man, but immense through shoulders and hips, and his legs were grotesquely thick such that he walked with an odd, shuffling gait. His skin was burned and dark and terribly scarred as if a shark had taken bites out of him then dragged him face down across the coral. He said, “Time.” His was a rusty voice, a drinker’s voice, the voice of a man who’d survived a hanging.

Dr. Enn consulted his watch. He was much lovelier and infinitely fragile compared to his subject. His hair was tight and black and he might’ve been a runway model. His pretty face bore the elastic expression of a man knuckling under to sea-sickness; sweat oozed from him. He said, “Seventeen minutes, forty-three seconds. I’m impressed… although it’s hardly a record.”

“How is Esogi? Bangkok, right?” Dr. Esogi was Dr. Enn’s colleague at the institute researching Conrad’s ‘compellingly bizarre’ physiological and neurological activity.

“There’s a symposium. Very prestigious.”

“Old Burt’s golfing and whoring it up between panels, I bet.”

“Yes—I was hoping to accompany him.” Enn managed a smile.

Conrad laughed and found his cigarettes and matches on the coffee table and lighted one. He studied Enn as Enn’s face gathered the unwholesome light from the projection beam. “Are you ok, Doc?”

“Oh, ha-ha, don’t mind me.” Worms crawled across Enn’s cheek. A butterfly sloughed its chrysalis and fluttered against his forehead. The sun was a black disc rising from his left eye. “Do you mind if I kill this—?”

“Please.” Conrad gestured indulgently. His hands had steadied, his pulse rate begun to drop into the high-normal range.

Dr. Enn shuddered and clicked off the projector and the room was flush with soft blues and blacks. After a significant pause, he said, “Dr. Esogi mentioned your unorthodox modalities, but I must confess…” He referred,

of course, to the dull gray tube on the table, its tightly rolled sheets of waterproof paper with their diagrams and formulas; micro-slides of photography that ranged from disquieting to monstrous, and the monstrously incomprehensible. “We’ll resume the battery when you’ve rested.”

“Thanks, doc. This’ll be the last session for a while, so be thorough.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Sorry, doc. My public demands an appearance.”

“I think I’ll detour to the bar and have a drink. Gentlemen.” Dr. Enn nodded to the agents, grabbed his coat and left in a reasonably dignified hurry.

“The fuck is this operation you got going?” Marsh said. “I told you, Leo, we dig through a few phone records, make a few calls, follow that fruity little doc around, we find out where our boy disappears to.”

“Yes, what is this operation?” Singh nodded at the machinery, the tangle of leads.

“Sensory stim,” Conrad said without a hint of irony. “Big match coming up in a few weeks. I use all kinds of techniques to get my head in the game. Hypnotherapy, regression. Whatever.”

“But… if that little fellow is correct, you just held your breath for over fifteen minutes. That isn’t humanly possible.”

Marsh said, “Where did you get that collage?” He was still staring at the projector and what had beamed from its eye. “That’s vintage Cold War eyes-only shit. Some kind of mind-conditioning protocol. What the hell you want with a military grade brainwashing protocol.”

“I don’t want it. Imogene left it behind.”

“Doesn’t explain why you’re enacting the procedure. This isn’t the kind of shit you play with, Connie.”

“Trying to get into my sister’s head,” Conrad said. As always he told most of the truth. It was the only way to stay half a step ahead of the bastards. You told ninety-nine percent of the truth and saved the lies for emergencies. “She’s after something, I don’t know what. Maybe she’s trying to shed some light on a moldy old government conspiracy. Maybe she wants to

prove my dad was locked away because he knew too much. She didn't bother to tell me."

"We'll be taking these materials off your hands," Singh said.

Conrad smiled. "Easy come, easy go. She found them lying around somewhere." *Somewhere* included abandoned bunkers and secret stashes and lost government installations around the world, a few decommissioned black ops facilities. "The stuff you're looking at belongs to a file under MK Ultra. Way before we were born to this veil of tears. Project TALLHAT, I think." He waited for a flicker of recognition, of fear or surprise, but the agents just stared like fish. "And on the subject of Genie—"

"Haven't heard anything since the South America rumor," Marsh said. "Which, as you discovered, was a wild goose chase."

"She's dead, Jim," Singh said and gazed sadly into his empty glass.

"Dead or burrowed in like a tick," Marsh said. He refilled both their glasses. The men sipped and kept staring at Conrad with those fish-eyed expressions. "We can't figure out what she was up to."

"We haven't quite decided what *you're* up to." Singh lighted a cigarette.

"Me? Fighting. Looking for my sister. She was obsessed with finding some guys. Cold War guys. Guys associated with this TALLHAT program. I need another name. Maybe two. Figure you boys can help me. These papers gotta be hooked into a database somewhere."

"No shit," Marsh said. "Want us digging up bones in an the Old Spooks Graveyard? Could be dangerous. Gonna be costly, for sure."

"How do you plan to compensate us?" Singh breathed smoke. "Planning to sell a house? One of your bolt holes? Is that wise? You seem to worry about death from above more than anybody I've met."

"I worry about death from every direction. There's a payday coming. What do you say?"

"Yeah? Who are you up against?" Marsh appeared intrigued.

"The Greek."

"He's the number three contender," Singh said. "I'm impressed."

“They must be betting on him to murder you,” Marsh said. He glanced at the ashtray full of cigarette butts and smirked. “The Greek carves you then gets his own shot at the title. You’re a tune up match.”

“Something like that. He won’t carve me, though. He’s a grappler. He’ll pull off my arms.” Conrad smiled and lighted another cigarette. He’d watched several dozen videos of the Greek, a hulking brute who favored exotic helms of savage beasts. The Greek had once snatched a full grown lion from the ground and broken its neck with a quick twist. Some whispered he dwelt in a cave in the mountains like old Polyphemus. “It’s a mortality ludus, so the money is good. When I get it.”

“Uh-uh, sweetheart. Cash up front. We’ve got operating expenses… wives, girlfriends, bookies.” Marsh made a face and drained another glass.

“Okay, Connie,” Singh said with a sharp glance at his partner. “Robert and I didn’t fly all the way out here to break your balls, as the kids say. We’ll see what we can find about TALLHAT. Cash on delivery.” He stood and stretched, then walked to the projector and gathered the film and the photographic plates piled there on a tray.

“Thanks, boys,” Conrad said.

The three remained a while longer, smoking cigarettes and polishing off the scotch. And when his self-appointed watchdogs had gone, Conrad made reservations for a flight to the United States, set the machinery in motion for the next phase, perhaps the final phase of his quest.

Interlude

Dr. Drake, that urbane devourer of children, wasn’t the Devil, but he wanted the title. That, according to the book of Imogene.

In the weeks before Conrad’s father suffered a massive coronary in his cell at Grable and sailed off to join Mom in the Happy Hunting Grounds, he spilled the beans about Drake and their work together to Imogene, and thus deflected her rising star unto madness and death.

Nice going, Pop. In bitter moments, Conrad always thought Genie should’ve known better about gawking into the abyss and so on. Their father wasn’t a nice man, probably not even a decent one.

Imogene laughed and said Conrad was right on that count. Dad allegedly killed a fellow technician at a laboratory, back in the 1970s—some poor schmuck named Enrique Valdez. Imogene told Conrad all about it late at night when they'd gotten stoned off their asses and drunk a quart of wine. As a kid, she'd eavesdropped on Dad and Mom arguing, pieced together a cryptic phone conversation, and had gotten her sticky mitts on one of Dad's journals that allegedly made oblique reference to the event. Supposedly there was some kind of top secret bio-weapons program and Valdez tried to steal one of Dad's formulas, maybe to claim it for his own and get a promotion, maybe to invent something and get rich in the private sector—there was no telling.

All she knew for certain was Dad caught the sneak and killed him. Crushed Valdez's head with a hotplate; cooked the guy's face in the process. Conrad didn't believe it because Dad would've gotten locked up for that kind of stunt, and probably forever. Imogene said Dad was too valuable and had too many powerful friends, so the government waved its wand and the killing got swept under the carpet. They filed it as a tragic accident. One could only wonder how many other "tragic accidents" there'd been.

Conrad was even leerier of Dad after that little campfire tale. Then, Dad had his epic breakdown and got hauled away by guys with butterfly nets and they never spoke again.

Imogene was the one who'd visited Dad at that posh Pacific Northwest asylum called Grable, smuggled in whiskey and cigars, patiently endured his episodes of mania and delusion. Frequently, she brought books he'd requested; the musty, esoteric kinds of tomes hoarded in the trunks of Far Eastern antiquarians, many of them poorly typeset or delivered to moldering parchment in the native scripts of their authors (many of these the very same Imogene would inherit one day, then pass along to Conrad). Dad was enamored of ancient astrological theory, most particularly the research of Chinese scholars during the Zhou Dynasty. He spent hundreds of hours meticulously documenting references to astronomical phenomena, with special emphasis on platelet-like bodies and gigantic cellular structures. These he cross indexed with modern accounts of similar unexplained anomalies, a significant portion recorded by NASA shuttle cameras and the International Space Station. Cosmic dust and gas, luminous

clouds, sunspots, or evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence—who could say? The universe was a black forest, after all. It added up to something piscine in Dad's estimation, even if the rest of the experts weren't overly galvanized about the prospects so obliquely suggested.

Imogene became curious; curiosity was the definition of her career. Dad was in his cups, straddling the border of utter psychosis, thus when he explained the nature of his research, his hypotheses regarding Dr. Drake's Technique, its profound generative connotations, and the doctor's affiliation with some ominous and nameless religious cult whose leaders sought transcendent power, perhaps godhood, she was intrigued, but skeptical.

The skepticism didn't linger.

Imogene had been the anal-retentive, type A personality, a woman in control, just like Mom. Normally, her comport was smooth and cool as polished steel. She'd taken a leave of absence from her job and was often in the company of a Mexican national, a scientist named Raul Lorca who was in turn a younger colleague of Dad's. Dad had originally introduced Imogene and Lorca and things between her and the dashing young Mexican took off like fireworks.

Conrad met the guy half a dozen times—the scientist was in his late thirties and excruciatingly handsome. He had a self-deprecating sense of humor and seemed genuinely humble for a celebrated genius. Mostly, though, Conrad knew him from Imogene's rants about Dr. Drake and the need to assemble allies against that worthy's schemes. Lorca was a mysterious figure, fast-tracked for the Nobel until a fall from grace, of unspecified nature, led to expatriate status. His research for the Mexican government had been tangentially related to Drake's own. Like Imogene, he believed Dr. Drake and Dad were on to something, that the Drake Technique might be bigger than atomic theory.

The last time Conrad saw Imogene alive, it was a few months after their impromptu rendezvous at the Monarch Grill. On this occasion she was frazzled, febrile, chain-smoking and pacing the confines of her apartment in San Francisco, the one Conrad loved because it was an oasis in the alcove of a warehouse converted to art galleries and a discotheque.

The apartment was dark and stifling as an untended aquarium. It reeked of musk and alcohol. The drapes were drawn tight and the door resembled a bank vault with its locks and bars and bolts. Her plants were dead, the sink was jammed with dishes and broken wine glasses. More glasses and bottles cluttered every room. Her tabby, the redoubtable Jeeves, had run away to his people.

She dwelt among heaps of paper—reams of hastily jotted personal observations, international newspaper clippings of UFO reports and king-sized envelopes of surveillance photographs of former Drake clients and underlings that would've done the likes of Singh and Marsh proud. Astoundingly, she'd acquired a slightly water-damaged ledger from Drake's defunct research center in Spain—the Cloister had been largely destroyed in an earthquake and the resulting fire three or four years after Ezra died there. Allegedly, Drake perished in the destruction. Certainly there'd been no official sightings of him since then.

The file contained a list of patients and next of kin contacts, research notes and so forth. However, the *pièce de résistance* was a dossier on Dr. Ambrose Drake cobbled from the archival records of the FBI, CIA and INTERPOL. The mother lode, she called it.

Come on, bro! Do you think pop read about Drake in Scientific American? The guy doesn't exist, really. Nobody knows about Drake except people he wants to meet. Drake contacted Dad, sent him a letter. I saw the goddamned thing; oh yeah, the doctor was so very sorry about young master Ezra, would that he could help, condolences, condolences, etc. At the end he gets to the point, does the soft sell routine, invites the family to his clinic in Spain. Crap! Coincidence? Did he pick Ezra's name out of a hat? Or maybe it had something to do with pop's research—the research he was doing on the side, the unfunded stuff. Uh-huh, I bet Drake was extremely intrigued by Dad's thesis on quantum physics and the theoretical application of micro technology. I mean, hell, that was before nanotech was even a term. Nope, Drake knew what Dad wanted and how badly he wanted it. Ezra was a tiny sacrifice in the scheme of things, if you look at it from Dad's perspective. He's a pure philanthropist and they're the individualist's worst nightmare. The ol', 'if you could end world suffering by killing one innocent' choice.

Care to guess what Drake's success rate was with his miracle procedure? Low. The rate was so low I bet the placebo effect covers most of those spontaneous remissions. That center was a roach motel. Drake was peddling poison to the bugs. Or maybe it was worse than that, more diabolical. Maybe those poor little fuckers were sacrifices. Ritual sacrifices on the altar of pseudo science.

Then there's Dad in his loony bin. You never talked to him after he got committed, you don't know what he was up to at Grable. A bloody Lovecraft asylum with a fresh coat of paint and cable TV in all the rooms. I guess he received some odd visitors—spooks, government shrinks, scientists of every persuasion. I bribed one of the orderlies to be my fly on the wall. The orderly said our patriarch was in constant contact with foreign nationals. A gaggle of chemists, some of them on the lam, incidentally. All picking his brain about the Drake Technique. Word gets around, y'know. Since nobody'd seen hide nor hair of Drake in years, Dad became the de facto guru. I mean, Drake was older than some of those Nazi scientists living out their golden years in South America. He has to be dead, right? Course he does.

Another weird thing—Dad's name is flagged at the Bureau. The whole family's flagged. You too, bucko. It's a low key watch list. I stumbled across it by pure chance. Makes me wonder why I was ever hired. I mean, picture the Feds hiring someone on a suspected Red list back in the '50s and you'll get the idea. Somebody big pulled strings to clear my admission. Doesn't make sense… or maybe it makes all the sense in the world. Better not touch that right now.

Dad wrote a thesis. It's called "Imago Effect," supposedly based on an ancient Greek collection of epistles, some occult tome he got as a door prize from our vacation in the Pyrenees. Dad's thesis is all about how Dr. D. and friends plan to become gods. Creepy isn't the word, brother mine.

Dad made a pact with Drake. Dad wanted the answers. He got 'em; see, that's why the worms ate his brains. Forbidden knowledge, brother dear. Sure as shit wasn't grief. Know what his part of the bargain was? Know what he did to pay his debt? Mom figured it out, maybe not completely. But enough to make like a banzai pilot. Drake took those children. He ate Ezra

and in return gave Dad the keys to Hell. I'm gonna figure out where he dropped 'em and raise a little myself.

Conrad had accepted each proffered scrap of "evidence" with polite interest, infinitely more concerned about his sister's erratic demeanor, her non-sequiturs and paranoid monologues. She refused to answer the phone; even as they chatted, her supervisor at the bureau office left a brusque message on the answering machine. Conrad got the distinct impression that Imogene was looking into the barrel of a suspension, or worse.

He smiled and nodded, but couldn't fool his sister.

Imogene's expression smoothed into that of a statue, a marble queen. She whip-cracked the back of her hand across his mouth, slashed him with her class ring, chipped his teeth with the force of it. He stood mute and stolid and watched the tears make diamonds of her eyes, watched the knot form between her knuckles, a thundercloud of ruptured veins. He said nothing, waiting, because this was as it had ever been; she was irresistible as gravity and boar tides, as a train wreck. His most tenable option, the brotherly option, was to endure the storm.

I was going to kill him. Had it planned out for his birthday. He let that monster eat our brother to advance some goddamned occult hypothesis. But I was too chickenshit to pull it off; convinced myself he wasn't the one that needed a bullet in the head. Course, he goes and springs a leak in the old ticker. Maybe God sent an angel of death to even the score.

She was falling apart, but what could he do? The family wasn't much for interventions, historically speaking. He didn't do anything, in the end; impotent and weak in the presence of her towering rage, her maniacal obsession. She wiped her eyes, sighed, and let him wrap her hand with a towel full of ice cubes. She ordered Chinese; they ate from the cartons because that was safest, considering the sanitation problem with her sink, and come the fortune cookies, her normal acerbic personality had reasserted itself.

Me and Raul are on this case. Drake is listed as deceased in official government records, but Raul thinks the shithead is still out there somewhere, that his cabal of black magic-loving, eugenics-worshipping lunatics is gathering power. I want payback for what happened to our

brother. Raul's gonna help me get it. We may go underground for a while. I'll call when I can. If something happens to me… She intoned the cliché with a dramatic wink and proceeded to sketch a course of action. The melodrama smacked of grotesquery because both of them knew something *was* going to happen. It was in the stars.

During a lull in the conversation, he cracked his cookie. His fortune said: *imago, imago, imago*.

Chapter Two

1

Conrad left his island bolt hole and flew to Crete to attend the last supper of his adopted uncle and manager, a dying billionaire named Cyrano Kosokian.

The plane touched down amid a heat wave. A dour chauffeur in a dark suit and rimless sunglasses waited outside customs. He held a homemade sign that read, *Mr. Navarro*. He introduced himself as Sergio, took the bags, and put Conrad in the back seat of an antique Packard.

"Welcome back," Nikolai DeKoon said from the front passenger seat. This was Kosokian's major domo of some twenty-five years. DeKoon, an expatriate British gentleman, was lean and pale and dressed as always in a white suit. He projected an aura of effete menace that frightened Conrad as a boy and merely disquieted him as a man.

"Came down from the castle to squire me yourself? I'm flattered." Conrad didn't offer to shake hands.

"Special occasion. Uncle is down to hours. Half the people in the airport are likely here for the festivities tonight."

Conrad had noted the abundance of limousines on the curb and imagined the fleet of them winding along the desolate roads to Uncle K's abode. He said, "Everybody loves a fucking parade."

It was a long drive along the coastal foothills despite the fact Sergio kept the accelerator mashed to the floorboard while a tiny national flag on the radio antenna snapped in the breeze. Pavement ended at the city limits and

the car was engulfed in a cloud of white dust. The air-conditioner was broken. Conrad had to keep the window cracked and the dust swirled into the compartment and formed a powdery layer upon his clothes.

Eventually, they approached the mountains and arrived in the courtyard of a mansion. A low stone wall crumbled on three sides; remnants of an orchard sprawled in an untended morass. Rocky hillside terraced down to a distant swath of shining water. The mansion itself was decayed into a state of grandiose ruination, slumping toward the stony earth of its foundation.

Conrad climbed out, dusting his hat. A pair of ancient men clad in sweat-blacked dungarees labored to draw a bucket from the well, which sat between the house and a newer timber garage. The pair stood so close to one another, for a moment he savored the illusion they were conjoined. They stared at him with dead-fish eyes, tongues wriggling inside toothless mouths. One wiped gnarled, greasy fingers on his sleeve and began to draw on the rope. Conrad's flesh prickled at the sight of them, his instinct alerted to some threat it didn't comprehend.

DeKoon snapped shut his cell phone and said, "Ta-ta for now, dear boy. Urgent matters press. I'll see you at the banquet, of course." He alighted from the car and strode quickly away toward a small villa some distance from the main house.

Sergio slammed the trunk. He mounted the cracked marble steps with the bags, beckoned for Conrad to follow. "Your Uncle asked me to bring you directly. He is weak."

Cyrano Kosokian bore no relation to Conrad. He'd been a longtime friend of Dad's, although he refused to disclose the details of how they'd met or why they'd stayed in touch. Uncle Kosokian relished his secrets. The joys of manipulation appealed to him almost as much as did the pleasures of brute force. When things went south at the Navarro home after Ezra's death, Dad sent Conrad to live at this very estate for eleven years. Conrad sulked in rage and despair at being exiled from his sister and his home. Uncle Kosokian had chuckled and said, *You are my apprentice. You are my little pet Kent Allard. The secrets of life and death, pain and suffering, shall be yours. Except, I shall not teach you to cloud the minds of men, but to rip their hearts from their breasts and split their brain pans and eat that jelly*

like caviar! To which Conrad had smartly responded, *Hell with Allard, I want to be Cranston.*

He received an opulent private education via tutors. Uncle Kosokian had also instructed young Conrad in the princely arts, including that of warfare and close combat, had groomed him for the clandestine spectacles of the Pageant and its gladiatorial exhibitions—a great and secret show that had played to the tune of obscenely rich patricians since ancient times. The man had participated in the secret arenas during his own sordid youth, had spilled his share of blood. He taught Conrad most everything there was to know about killing men and beasts for sport and profit.

Uncle Kosokian was the last of umpteen generations of olive plantation barons and shipping magnates. On the origins of his lineage he was customarily sly, saying only that an ancestor of his had almost done for Odysseus. He'd once confided to Conrad over a bowl of sweet red wine that he inherited everything by virtue of his elder siblings being killed during the wars. An accomplished prodigal son and all around ne'er-do-well, he'd not lifted a finger to advance the family fortune or secure a wife or sire offspring. He intended to wallow in luxury and squander the Kosokian riches down to the bitter dregs, pursuing whores, eating and drinking to excess, and losing vast sums while gambling on sports. Judging by the ramshackle appearance of the estate, the mission appeared to have been accomplished.

2

Cyrano Kosokian was a behemoth confined to a fancy pneumatic hospital bed. Perhaps seven feet tall, perhaps more, and hideous—his was the face of a somewhat melted Christmas gnome. An oxygen mask depended from the wattles of his brontosaurus neck. Kosokian's private nurse, a haggard Armenian, had snatched a pack of Gauloises and cursed him on her way out as she lighted one.

Flies gathered.

The longer Conrad looked, the more of them swarmed, fat and torpid in the killing jar of the study. They buzzed around his mentor's hands, played touch-and-go on stained bandages; trundled along his sleeves as if he were

already a carcass. He muttered in bastard English, took long swallows of the Tiger's Milk his servants mixed by the pitcher. His teeth were long and sharp and the shade of bloody ivory.

Conrad distracted himself with the décor during their frequent silences. All arches and plaster and undertones of medieval squalor. Too dark, too ripe, too many flies. And too many narrow stairs in the spiral case. Kosokian's study occupied the top of a seaside-facing tower and was crammed to the gills with antiquarian treasures, much draped by dusty sheets in advance of his permanent vacation. A brass telescope pointed at the balcony where strips of light crept through the shutters.

The emaciated elders shuffled in from their duties and each took a post on either side of the bed. "These are the angels of my nature," Uncle Kosokian said, forestalling Conrad's question. "One better than the other. They are also my bodyguards."

"Where did you get these two? A fire sale?" Conrad eyed them with a contemptuous smile to disguise his unease. He disliked their beady eyes and toothless grins, how they hunched like vultures and picked at their scabrous flesh, all the while listening with feigned disinterest. Neither amounted to much more than a bundle of twigs and rawhide, yet some quality of presence, a violent magnetism, radiated from them; a similar dark aura emanated from Uncle Kosokian and seemed to intensify with age and infirmity rather than diminish. Conrad would've been tempted to characterize the force as evil if he subscribed to such concepts.

"Be kind," Uncle Kosokian said, his accent miraculously thinning. "You'll inherit their services, if you're lucky. Meanwhile, a final request."

"No," Conrad said.

"What do you mean, no?"

"No, I won't stop looking for Genie."

"Lad, I admire your pluck. Your nemesis, this Drake, he is powerful. Powerful and terrible. I beg you, desist before he takes notice and squashes you."

"I would hate for that to happen. I will try to be clever."

“You are cunning as a beast is cunning,” Uncle Kosokian said. “That’s not enough. Did your father ever explain why he split you and fair Imogene when you were children? Why he sent you to me?”

“Dad was vague on that point.”

“The fellow wasn’t fond of sharing his thoughts. Too many dark secrets. Too many enemies from his service with your government. Imogene was to be his weapon against them. That’s why he made certain she was groomed for law enforcement. She served him well. You, he wished to protect from his foes. Believe it or not, he loved you best, Conrad. That is why he sent you to me, why you were cloistered here in my demesne.” Kosokian sucked a tall glass of Tiger’s Milk and breathed heavily. “Your father had other plans for you. Alas, his breakdown and untimely demise derailed everything he’d worked to accomplish. He would not approve of your Quixotic pursuit of Imogene. She became embroiled in his vendetta with the forces of darkness, as it were. No sense following her into oblivion.”

Conrad said, “You talk a lot for a guy on oxygen.”

Kosokian’s immediate family and friends began arriving at sundown. These were a motley collection of down-at-the-heels aristocrats, dilettantes, and an ever-circling swarm of lamprey and pilot fish. Conrad remembered a handful of them from his youth, and he shook hands and kissed cheeks as the guests ascended the steps and passed through the front door in a cavalcade of morbid pageantry. Kosokian’s servants had shut off the electricity and lighted dozens of torches and lamps, hundreds of fat, gothic candles in chandeliers and candelabras. Smokey shadows hung thick in the narrow passages and the vaulted banquet hall alike. The walls were decorated with soot-stained tapestries, curtains, and a grand collection of archaic weaponry and armor.

The whole roasted boar arrived on a five-foot-long trencher, apple in mouth. From his position as guest of honor near the head of the main table, Conrad eyed the assembly in their cloaks and capes, their tall hats and taller hairdos, and thought this could be a banquet in the castle of a degenerate prince circa the latter middle ages. He could almost taste the metal of the long knives—those in their hands and the ones up their sleeves. The hall was indeed dim, but he sensed a deeper and more sinister darkness in the

furtive glances, the sly, cold smiles. Upon Kosokian's demise his kith and kin would divide his estate as they ferociously divided the boar.

Attendant's wheeled the great man into the hall aboard a mahogany chair oversized as a throne and carved in the likeness of a dragon. Kosokian had dispensed with the oxygen mask and donned resplendent silk robes of crimson trimmed in gold, and jeweled rings on every finger. He laid an obsidian rod across his knees. A golden pendant set with an obscenely large ruby reinforced his image as the moribund potentate, a sorcerer-king who'd stepped from tarot card to hold a final debauched court.

Servants in crimson livery arrived with platters and decanters while a sextet of troubadours decked in medieval garb mounted a dais and started in with their flutes, harps, and recorders. Incense bubbled and spat within strategically placed braziers, cloying odors of lotus and dragons'-blood overwhelming the rot of Kosokian's bandages, the reek of his decayed flesh.

Conrad escaped as soon as humanly possible, seizing his opportunity when plates were finally cleared and the assembly broke down into pairs for dancing. He sneaked to the balcony and stood in the shadows, smoking a cigarette and watching moonlight glint from the waves.

His escape was short-lived—several guests emerged from the hall, led by a servant who lighted a torch in a sconce and revealed Conrad's hiding place. A curvaceous blonde in a bright green summer dress introduced herself. She was a cousin of their host, several places removed. Her father hailed from York and served the British consulate. Her mother worked for the queen as a dining consultant. Her brother flew warplanes in the Royal Air Force. So far as Conrad could determine after listening for ten minutes, the girl herself did nothing except drink and spend her parents' money. Her cheeks were rosy from heat and booze.

"So, why are you lurking?" she said. Her diamond earrings blazed in the torchlight. "Aren't you the guest of honor?"

"I was looking for the cask of Amontillado," he said. His shirt stuck to the small of his back.

She laughed. Perspiration beaded in the hollow of her throat, gleamed across the swell of her breasts. "For the love of God, Montresor," she said,

and moved her hip so that it locked with his.

"Yes, for the love of God."

He went with her to the garden and lifted her dress and pressed her against a shattered colonnade and they coupled in the dull red light that spilled from the terrace. The stars flickered with the beat of his rising blood and began to turn.

She nipped his ear and said, "I don't like that mean old uncle of yours. He's a fraud. Not as sick as he lets on, for damn sure."

Conrad looked into her eyes, but that didn't help. He gripped her haunches and worked harder.

She said, "We were here for Christmas. After everyone went to bed, the old man rolled out on the balcony in his creepy throne-mobile. I was down here in the bushes smoking a joint. He stepped off the balcony and zipped into the darkness like one of those wire-fu action heroes. I didn't see where he went. Heard him cackling, though."

He pondered a response. There were so many questions. His next thrust did the trick and she screamed and wrapped herself around him like a boa constrictor and he forgot what he'd intended to ask.

Uncle Kosokian passed away later that evening. Three days later his body, wrapped head to toe in a silk shroud, was placed on a pyre at sunset and burned. He did not leave Conrad a penny.

3

When Conrad arrived in the States he bought a Cadillac, a 1948 Sixty Special Fleetwood, at a used car lot in Santa Fe. The salesman claimed it was originally the property of a small-time cartel boss who got himself whacked by a jealous mistress. There were bullet holes, somewhere. Conrad wondered how many cars rolling around once belonged to dead people. *We drive their cars, sleep in their beds, wear their clothes. Wear their faces.*

He called a friendly private investigator named Tony Kite and doubled down on the finder's fee for the Brazilian. Finder's and catcher's fee. Tony promised to assign more guys, he was closing in, etc., etc. Conrad wished he could've consolidated his efforts, put the Two Stooges, Marsh and Singh,

on the case, but the Stooges weren't his friends. They answered to higher powers. If they realized he wanted to talk with a wanted criminal such as Souza, their evil faces would light up like kids at Christmas. Then there'd be hell to pay, and more. That the nation's number one intelligence agency hadn't put two and two together was both alarming and amusing.

Money was a problem. Money was *always* a problem no matter how many bones he crushed or how much blood he let or dues he paid. The fucking rent was always due.

One night he was waiting out the small hours in a saloon in the badlands by nursing a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black when a rowdy group piled in from the desert darkness and started tearing up the joint. He'd situated in a dark corner facing the door, a woman tight against his hip. Him and the girl had been on the road for forty-eight hours since he found her at a booth in a diner looking shrewdly forlorn. A peroxide blonde with tepid eyes and a livid keloid on her neck in the shape of a stylized jellyfish that elongated and distorted as she breathed.

The mark electrified the hairs on his body, ignited the primitive fuse at his core, cranked the rotor in his brain, churned primordial muck. But he didn't protest, didn't turn on his heel and fly. Flight hadn't worked before, anyway. They, whoever *they* were, the *Honorable Opposition*, as he thought of them, had had their hooks deep in him for a year now, a year that he'd noticed, just before the expedition to South America. His hunch was all the work with the transcendental meditation and autohypnosis, the hours of gawping at psychedelic films and weird Rorschach blot patterns Imogene cadged from god knew where, had gotten the gears turning, had really and truly cracked the door. Maybe he was entering an altered state as Dad prophesied, as that devilish eminence Dr. Drake had allegedly attained. Conrad might be on his way to achieving godhead and wouldn't that be a kick in the ass?

Or, more likely, exhaustion and brain damage were doing the talking.

Her name was Yolanda, or Wanda, he couldn't remember, and she was too drunk to see straight. She rested her head on the table between the ashtray and a handful of quarters. A cigarette smoldered in the corner of her mouth.

He pulled it free, frowned at the lipstick ring, and smoked the remainder while the newcomers chuckled and hooted like hyenas and glass shattered.

The group was eclectic: three men in polo shirts and golf slacks, their big-haired girls in sequined cocktail dresses; a squad of hurly-burly bikers in full-on leather regalia, bodyguards of the Rodeo Drive refugees; and a tall, rangy man in faded Army fatigues. His hair was black and sleek, his eyes pale as ice water. His nose was flat. He wore a spiked collar, spiked bracelets, and a fistful of shiny, expensive rings. His boots were the steel toe kind. A nasty bruise on his sculpted cheekbone was fading to yellow.

They'd grabbed a bunch of tables and commenced drinking. The girls played pool with a couple of the drunker, braver locals. The bikers slammed tequila and took turns hurling shot glasses at the mirror above the bar and the bartender himself, who eventually retreated to the kitchen and hid. The pretty boys in the polo shirts guffawed and sipped beer.

The tall, black-haired man stared at Conrad. Conrad stared back, highlighting him with a golden shaft of light from nowhere. *I can do that AND bend spoons with my mind power. Holy shit*. He blinked and the shaft of light, which no else seemed to notice, winked out. The black-haired guy was Rauno-something or other. Members of the Pageant knew him as the Finn, an unranked fighter on the periphery and rising fast. Young and mean. If he lived a few more years he might land a patron, might become somebody. Conrad thought the guy didn't have a few more years.

The Finn unfolded from his chair and strolled over to where the party girls were flirting with the hapless locals. The local boys were stout, blue collar types, probably construction workers; corduroy jackets, greasy ball-caps on backward, half-blitzed and irritable as bulls. Neither was too happy when the Finn told them in an exaggerated accent to get their filthy Yankee paws off his women. There was a long moment where nothing happened, then one of the men smashed the Finn's jaw with a bottle and his partner broke a pool cue across the Finn's spine. The Finn shrugged and laughed and wiped a trickle of blood from his lip. He turned and stuck his thumb in the eye of the guy who'd hit him with the pool cue. The other man threw a haymaker punch, but the Finn absorbed it and caught his arm and twisted it until it crunched. He ground the jagged base of the bottle into the man's nose. Blood rushed over his knuckles. Then he leaned over and caught the man

who was shrieking and crawling away by the testicles and the scruff of the neck, hoisted him shoulder-high and pitched him through the big picture window in a shower of neon. The bikers cheered and the polo shirt boys gave the Finn a round of golf claps.

The Finn wasn't breathing hard. He looked at Conrad, hand on hip.

"Sit down before you fall down," Conrad said. He poured another glass of booze and drank it all in one steady pull.

The bikers stirred, but the Finn waved and they settled. "Are you afraid of me?" His accent was completely invisible now.

"He's a tub of shit. Smash him, Ronnie," one of the girls said. She popped her gum.

Conrad frowned and poured again and drank again. His short hair was combed. He wore a casual navy blue suit, nice shoes, everything.

"Be quiet," the Finn said to the girl and she shut up.

"He's afraid okay," one of the polo shirt boys said. "Lookit him. Jill's right. Chubs is a round mound of ground. Givin' you the hairy eyeball. Kick his ass, man. Fuck, lemme." And everybody but the Finn laughed.

"I apologize for the idiots," the Finn said. "I know who you are. Fight me."

"I don't want to fight you," Conrad said. But he did want to, very, very much. The more he watched the Finn's entourage, the more he yearned to taste blood. "I don't do unsanctioned matches. My people aren't comfortable with it."

"Please do not be disrespectful."

"*You're* disrespectful and you're unranked. Don't bow up to me, son. It's unseemly. Look at my scars."

"I apologize. We would have a good match. You've seen my films. You know I can fight."

"Pick on some other guy, some other night. Sit down, have a drink."

"Name the terms."

"Go away, son."

The Finn gestured at one of the polo shirt boys and they held a whispered conference. The Finn said to Conrad, "Tomorrow night. There's a place not

far from here. You call your support people, whatever. I'm bringing my own staff and a film crew. So, full panoply."

"Full panoply." Conrad favored the simplicity of shoes and a t-shirt for something off the cuff like this, but the Finn obviously needed film, and film stock sold far better to the collectors if the contestants dressed in their peacock finest. "Seventy-five, winner take all."

The Finn didn't blink. "Done. Weapons? Hands and feet?"

"What do you prefer?"

The Finn smiled and made a fist.

4

He found the town in a dried up basin valley, dropped his film at a one-hour-photo-mat. The pictures were sequences of him and Wanda in various poses against the landscape and others of just the empty land itself shot from the moving car. Photography didn't particularly interest him. He snapped the photos because on occasion he'd spotted ghostly figures and orbs floating in the background of the developed film; hints of the unseen forces that surrounded him.

Wanda skipped off to have nails done at a salon. Conrad checked his battered and mutilated roadmap. His vision doubled; he wiped tears away with his sleeve. The sky contracted rhythmically, an origami nautilus.

The town was gritty, the kind of town one might expect from a macho man cigarette advertisement. High country, wind-blasted and strange in the provincial sense that such places have ever been strange to outsiders. Every structure creaked, every skinned surface ate the anemic light or gave it back too harshly.

Conrad squinted, clutched his head to keep it from cracking like a plate. His fingers were going numb, and that was odd; such a thing had never happened before unless he was blind drunk or succumbing to the sweet balm of unconsciousness from repeated blows to the head. The sensation came and went, tiny surges of disquiet.

He dialed Marsh from a payphone in the arcade between a tattoo parlor and a gun shop. It was a lengthy number printed inside a matchbook from the

Egyptian Casino in Atlantic City. Conrad had no need to dig up the matchbook. His memory wasn't perfect, not like Dad's, or Imogene's, or even Ezra's had been; even so, he possessed a mnemonic knack with patterns and sequences. Number strings were cake. No, he used the green and gold matchbook because he enjoyed the gilt lettering, its cured scent, the suggestion of great mysteries unfolding in the dark.

The line hummed.

A pit bull wandered the street, snuffling garbage. People gave it a berth without seeming to notice the object of their apprehension.

The line stuttered and snapped like a fire.

A kid in a biker jacket a couple of sizes too large stopped at Conrad's car, peered into the dirty windows.

"Hah," Marsh said, far away. Chamber music droned, water rushed over rocks. Woodwinds, violins, recorders, river stones rubbed smooth as glass. No opera today. Marsh had once confided that he preferred opera when his mood was savage.

"Marsh," Conrad said.

"What… Goddamn it." Marsh disconnected.

Conrad waited.

The kid in the biker jacket whistled to the pit bull. They walked across the deserted lot, went through a break in the cyclone fencing, soon became specks in the outlying fields. The white gulf was penetrated by water towers, train tracks, abandoned box cars, a million miles of scrub. Someday alien probes might descend, drill core samples and speculate whether life could've possibly existed here in aeons gone by.

The payphone rang. Marsh said, "It's okay now. How'd you get that number? That's my private number." The chamber music was gone.

"You gave it to me."

"Hell I did. When? When did I give you that number?"

"I don't remember. Perhaps Singh…"

"Call the other number, next time."

“The recording.” A heavily-accented voice would answer, say Conrad had reached Kow’s Mandarin Grill, please wait.

“Uh-huh. That one.” Marsh did something away from the receiver, came close again. He coughed. His voice was raspy; it thickened when he was upset. According to Singh, Marsh suffered from a rare bronchial disease, a souvenir from the Dark Continent. “Y’know we clandestine types wallow in the traditions of argot and subterfuge. It’s genetic.”

“Ah.”

“You know, Conrad, I was kinda worried you weren’t going to call in. Thought maybe you’d forgotten.”

“No worries, Rob. I’ll have your money.”

“Oh, don’t I know that. Where you headed, bud?”

“West.”

“Uh-huh. Where to?”

“There are sites in Washington. I might visit those.” Conrad smiled and his lips split, dribbled blood down his chin into the receiver. Marsh had him pigeonholed as a wannabe naturalist. That was fine, that was convenient, it kept them off his back. The Mima Mounds. The Juniper Dunes. The Horse Cliffs. A dozen others, most of them nameless and unmapped. He’d trod the ground of those places; camped in their primordial circumferences and watched star-fields blaze like iron in a crucible; burned innumerable rolls of film and waited for epiphanies that yet eluded him. Going back to those hallowed sites wasn’t likely to make a difference; the key to the whole mess was surely elsewhere in an exotic region, upon a darksome shore. However, he had to give Marsh something. Otherwise, Marsh would take what he wanted.

“Shouldn’t you be training?”

“I’m always training.”

“And that’s it. Huh.”

“I’m just driving.” Conrad wasn’t an artful liar; bluntness was his weapon of choice. However, when dealing with the likes of Marsh he’d gradually learned to adopt cursory camouflage, to blend in with his current habitat, an

ant trundling in the shadow of aardvarks. *Huh, I'm becoming proficient. Should've gone into law.*

"Uh-huh. Say, bud. People came by your house yesterday. The New England house."

"Who?" Conrad had almost forgotten about that place—monumentally gothic, surrounded by overgrown gardens and fieldstone walls; he hadn't been there in several years. An industrialist fan had given it to him as a present. Conrad had owned several homes before liquidating them to fuel his search for Imogene. Gifts from patrons and admirers. Cars too; and planes. All of it gone now, except for the New England house, a cabin in Washington State.

"People. We called in an eye in the sky and ran the pics—nada. They weren't ours and they weren't Company guys; probably foreign. Got any foreign friends?"

"I don't know them."

"No?"

"No."

"Uh-huh. Stranger things, I guess."

"I'm just driving."

"Sure, sure. Could be a coincidence. Maybe whoever owned that house before had some heat. That could be the deal."

"I don't know them." The conversation compounded Conrad's headache; his brow was slick and feverish. He feared the tension would prompt him to do something ill-advised. Occasionally, nerves caused him to burst into maniacal laughter. He had to get off the phone.

"Uh-huh, could be a coincidence. That's how a pal of mine got cashiered. I ever tell you that story? No? Sullivan ran an LP in Lima. Boring stuff, I promise you that. Not much of a health risk. Except Sully went into the wrong nightclub to get drunk and came out at exactly the wrong time; somebody thought he looked like somebody else who was also there, it was dark, and blah, blah, blah. Piece of piano wire will fit around anybody's neck if you cut it long enough."

"I don't know them."

“You’re just driving, right?”

“Right.”

“Uh-huh. Singh can meet you. He’s got business in the area. If you don’t hear from him in a few hours—”

“I’ll call back.”

“At the other number.”

“Okay.”

Marsh disconnected.

Conrad stared into the receiver. The concave oval of miniature black holes radiated waves of soft static like heat shimmering from desert highway.

He made another call, this one to some medical technicians affiliated with the Pageant and told them when and where the ludus would be, then hung up and slouched into a dollar store, bought a bag of aspirin packets and three bottles of generic seltzer water. The clerk at the register was excruciatingly polite. She seemed pleased to inform him that yes, the Happy Raven Hotel was about seventy miles up the highway, *Bon voyage, sucker*. He thanked her, went outside and chewed a fistful of aspirin, gulped the water.

Packs of urban cowboys trolled in pickups, spat tobacco at the gutters in well-rehearsed arcs. Some gave Conrad the evil eye, muttered to their partners, if they had any, to themselves if they didn’t. Country & Western tunes slithered from tin sheathes, coiled into his eardrum, tweaked the knob of his adrenal drip, caused a surge of testosterone that threatened to wake the prehistoric lizard. Opera for Marsh, Hank Williams for Conrad.

He revisited the photo shop and picked up his film. He sat on the bumper of the Cadillac and reviewed the stack flashcard style. Then he burned the pictures in a sodden pile, kicked the ashes to pieces as an afterthought. The ashes drifted across white and yellow parking stripes and were lost in the boundless fields.

5

The ludus went down at a mostly defunct strip mall just off the highway a few minutes after midnight. There was a film crew, a couple of equipment vans, the assorted handlers and hangers on attendant to these ludi. A small crowd, even for this. He'd placed a call to one of Uncle K's former liaisons and arranged for a surgeon, a couple of emergency techs, and three security guys. The security guys dressed in suits and carried Uzis slung under their coats. Their leader, a short, mean looking guy with false teeth shook Conrad's hand and said it was an honor to meet him.

Conrad strapped on a glorious plumed helm, a harness, greaves and boots. He wrapped his left fist in a cestus. The for-show-minimum. Across the lot the Finn was a terror with his oiled body and spiked-everything. The Finn opened his mouth and arched his back, sucking in oxygen. Conrad smiled without emotion and stared at the ground and waited for it to begin.

The Finn had killed his share of men, but they were lesser men, not first class talents. The last victim was a second-tier brute in Gibraltar; a real bloodbath, that one. Nothing for Conrad to scoff at, but nothing to worry about either. He'd watched the tapes, studied the taller man's movements, his favored techniques. The Finn was a striker, a pugilist enamored of cestus and cleats, knees and elbows. Conrad wasn't concerned with strikers; he was built to absorb that kind of punishment. A primer, a tune up for the real battles down the line. Easy money.

The Finn had killed many, many men, but lesser men. The Finn was killing Conrad.

The Finn's fists were too fast, too heavy and they were everywhere. Conrad was strong, but strong couldn't do much against fast this night and he was on his knees on the sticky asphalt in the crushed glass and gravel and it was all but over.

The grand, stony moon wobbled, lopsided and estranged. Its edges whickered against a whetstone of dark matter and coagulated fire, counterpoint to cosmic symphonies of gamma bombardment and imploding quantum particles. The moon shrieked below the threshold of human perception, reverberated in vast stygian chambers of rock and bone. Its light slopped as from a butcher's pail overflowed; a lantern bloated on reeking whale fat, the ribs and spleen of every woodsman who had gazed upon it

and trembled before the shutter shut and the bar dropped across the cottage door.

Conrad didn't see the moon or moths as large as silver dollars fluttering their dance in its milky radiation. His head was bowed. He saw worm holes; he saw his hand, wrapped in iron-studded rawhide, as a dismembered starfish welded to concrete; he saw the dim hulk of a windowless cement façade, the flank of a mall, a forgotten mausoleum commemorated by graffiti and posters bleached to zero resolution.

Then the Finn kicked him in the face with the ball of a reinforced hoplite sandal, hard as horn and laced below the crook of the knee, the boot of legions which had trod ancient slaughter fields black, and the sodium lamps leaned like palm trees in a hurricane, beamed their bright-hot lights into Conrad's eyes. Angels instantly retreated to wavering pinpricks. Devils made long, sinuous ribbons of themselves and hissed. Conrad's chin strap came apart and his helmet arced out in a cinematic parabola of gleaming metal and crimson bristles, bounced once into darkness and disappeared.

Cymbals clashed.

Conrad's blood jumped from him, hurled itself from him, declared him the headwaters of a river, a broken vessel, the Grail smashed upon rocks.

The Picts howled—

The painted devils, the fearful angels—

An x-ray of his skull in the doctor's hand—

A red infant, yarded from the womb trailing its umbilical cord—

A hog squealing in the stirrups, rising to meet the knife—

And the next dropkick slammed home into Conrad's ribcage with the weight of a derrick behind it, digging into the meat of him, the bones and the sinews of him bending around the leather and the steel and the Finn's calf, a granite oblong piston.

Conrad clasped that pillar in a death clinch. *Thank you*, he thought in that jigsaw moment when all moments converged, when all possibilities revolved upon the point of a tooth. *Thank you for that.* And he squeezed—

The planet hurtled through dusty space.

—a crocodile with a deer in its maw turning and turning over in the river, whipping the muddy water like a thresher takes wheat and covers the camera lens.

The Finn's thighbone snapped, then his spine; a sharp, pulpy report as of a pickaxe hacking into moist subject matter and then Conrad had the Finn's neck levered between elbow and sternum and he twisted with a convulsive scissoring of his hips, making a corkscrew. Paralysis, strangulation, death; quietly desperate as any pincer-to pincer mortal combat waged by arthropods in the soft grass of nature's killing floor.

After, no applause. The buzzing lamps, cold. A couple of guys in green smocks hustled Conrad into the back of a drywall van and switched on the fluorescents, began stitching him up.

Like Satan appearing in a puff of black smoke, DeKoon squatted in the opening that breached the cab. His sallow features shifted and flowed in the sickly light. "Should've gone the whole hoplite route—pila and knives. Rauno had too much faith in his hands. Rubbish with weapons. Bloody awful. At least you put him down. Thank god."

None of the fighters had names, barring fanciful nom de plumes, or popular crowd attributions. It was always the Finn, the Turk, the Russian. Conrad was the American, and that sufficed. At the moment he was the It boy representing what DeKoon referred to as 'the Colonies.'

Conrad couldn't speak because his lungs were deflated sacks of shocked flesh straining to expand and get some oxygen cycling before the lights went out. So he bled. He suspected DeKoon was a figment summoned by head trauma. What a backwater stage this was for a man of DeKoon's caliber. The man's presence here in the outpost of pillaged American heartland, the Fair Lady of Liberty and Plenty sans makeup, was supremely incongruous; so far removed from his customary haunts of European pleasure salons and Hong Kong opium dens. Conrad hoped the well-heeled ghoul would dissolve at any moment, sink into the quagmire of his id.

DeKoon grinned as if he tasted the very wish in Conrad's mind. "I am unhappy with your exhibition. You don't take unsanctioned fights. That's a no-no."

“Maybe we need to renegotiate my contract.” A medic ran a needle into Conrad’s shoulder and laced the heavy sutures in the manner of sealing a pigskin. Conrad’s mouth crimped tighter.

“Don’t be stupid, Conrad.” DeKoon picked lint from the breast pocket of his suit. His long, exquisite fingers would’ve brought tears to the eyes of world class pianists and state-sponsored torturers everywhere. “Do you think you’re the only attraction on Uncle’s string? *My string*, now. Disabuse yourself of that conceit. Your prior performances were excellent, but… After tonight’s debacle I am extremely nonplussed. Something’s different about you. Are you losing your edge, Conrad? Wine, women and song got you down? You looked slow. Slow and old.”

Conrad raised his head and flashed DeKoon a vicious grin.

“Ahh, good. That’s the temper we love.”

Conrad bled.

DeKoon made steeples of his horribly beautiful fingers. He appraised Conrad through the gaps. “Sweet, sweet, malevolent Conrad. What can I do for you? The answer is, ‘Anything.’ Tell me what you need and I’ll oblige. You’ve been saving your pennies. Do you want a tropical island? A flotilla of harem girls? A new car? Say the word, my boy. Because, something’s amiss. Indeed, you seem melancholy and reckless. Don’t be reckless with Uncle K’s investment.”

Conrad spoke thickly. “You don’t own me.”

“Oh. I was under the impression that I do…”

“Don’t push.”

“Imogene, Imogene, the prettiest girl I ever done seen? We can’t raise the dead, O friend of mine. We won’t take on the entire Mexican army. Bad business.”

“Wasn’t the Mexicans.”

“We know who it was. We don’t care to attract his attention, either. Nothing personal. Uncle tried to tell you this before.”

Conrad grunted and hung his head.

“Ah, well.” DeKoon made a sad face. “Goodbye for now, Conrad. We’ll be in touch. The main stage next, hmm?”

Conrad bled.

“Yes, I think so. I beg of you, keep your eye on the prize. No more shenanigans. Kay?”

“Conrad!” A woman called from outside the panel truck. Her voice was breathless and Midwest-nasal, tentative and unutterably drunk; the exact pitch to raise one’s hackles.

That was… what was her name? Yvonne, Luann? Wanda. Wanda, right. They had begun to run together, to become interchangeable, these Wanda’s.

“Your woman beckons,” DeKoon said. “I shan’t keep you apart. We’ll be in touch.”

6

“Conrad?” Wanda came into focus again.

The motel room was a swamp.

They’d been drinking vodka, because Conrad happened to have a half case stashed in the trunk of his Cadillac, and chain-smoking cloves as that’s what the girl carried in her transparent plastic purse with the Wonder Woman decal. She’d grown fond of cloves in college when she prowled coffee houses, dating the musicians, the painters, and the nihilistic poetry majors, whatever cliché with a pulse was handy. Clove was the watchword of cool people.

The girl attached herself to him like a barnacle to the hull of a ship. There were two kinds of women in his universe—the kind who screamed when he peeled off his shirt and revealed the scar-tissue narrative of his life; and the kind who wanted to fuck on the spot. Wanda was firmly in the second camp. After motoring through miles of white alkaline and rusted lake bottoms, they left their fingerprints and smudges on the drapes, the savaged sheets, each other. Here was morning—overcast, stark and cold as stars.

But now the sea change was in effect.

What had she said to him during the night? What had she whispered in the voice of the Other? *Something guttural and foreign. Germanic, Gallic… Imogene spoke German, I mean she did before she died; she could've been a translator instead of… Must be the burnt carpet, the chemicals in the epoxy confusing my dreams.*

What was it Wanda said?

(*they want in*)

He didn't want to remember, so stopped poking the dead animal with a stick. Wanda was just Wanda again, anyway.

Wanda's eyes glazed and she began the inevitable recoil into flight. Even the fearless ones had their limits. Ancient history was sexy; current news was less appealing. She was getting sober fast. The grisly cavalcade of memories from last night in the strip mall parking lot had doubtless begun to trickle, trickle, had begun to rearrange the landscape of her preconceptions.

Conrad wasn't surprised. Bearing witness to the spectacle left the Wanda's of his life cotton-mouthed and remorseful come sunrise when reality sifted through the frame, reshaped his pagan fugue into the sterile thrum of a modern world full of telephone poles and bellied wires, cracked highways and naked skulls withered to nutshells along the endless maze of ditches. He dressed in plumed helmet and cape and killed men and beasts for the pleasure of hideously rich beings who were only too glad to pay him a yeoman's wage. His would-be girlfriends had difficulty reconciling the reality of his avocation with the nature of their desires. Consequences returned full force with the cockcrow.

Daylight bleached his moonscape of a face. Black and blue on deadly nightshade, red meat bulged like an intestine in the corner of his right eye. The left eye was a glistening purple bud, clenched as a toddler's fist, its roots sunk deep in a hidden fracture that yawned with each hoarse exhalation. Blood drained steadily from crushed cartilage and ruined sinuses, yolked in the back of his throat, and he frequently hawked into the wastebasket.

Conrad knew he looked bad, had seen the Finn's handiwork as he leaned to spit phlegm in the sink. The face could've been his father's, and he cursed

himself because it was the same morbid thought that pricked him after every bout when he was morose and more than half drunk from the adrenaline of kill or be killed. Self loathing was a purer addiction than any combination of alcohol and cocaine, than any adrenal rush.

He'd weighed the damage as he slowly pulled on his grey and blue leisure suit, loose-fitting for the purpose of gliding over the lacerations of his rectangular torso, the welted minefields of his pylon thighs. None of it was truly serious, no important bones were broken, he was on top and a custom leather briefcase stuffed with sixty-five grand lay under the bed. Money to pay the tax men.

The phone barked; a lime-green rotary job. Wanda moved to answer it, stopped when Conrad gave her a look. Ten rings, then silence. That would be Marsh, Singh, or DeKoon. He wasn't in the mood for any of them, their accusations, interrogations, threats. Earlier, someone at the front desk had slipped a note under the door. The note gave an address and a date and was signed by his good friend Tony Kite. Tony was ready and waiting for the next step.

The room brightened by sluggish degrees. Big rigs loaded with produce and lumber rumbled past, shook the windows. The television snowed. Numbers shuttled on the clock.

Finally, she lighted a cigarette, smoked it while she watched him with heavy-lidded wariness. "Are you retarded?"

He stared at his swollen hand, limned on the table between a clogged ashtray and a bottle. The hand could've been the subject of a Bacon study, a rudely carved chunk of marble; it didn't seem attached at all, just lying there, mute and bruised. He said, "Cerebral hemorrhage."

"What."

"Brain damage. It's distinct from mental retardation."

"Oh." She sucked her cigarette. Her face was much older now, wasted. "Doesn't seem all that different to me. When it comes down to it."

Sometimes, when he lacked the will to concentrate, the needle jumped tracks. He said, "Goodbye, Wanda," instead of, *Let's get breakfast*.

"Huh?"

“Let’s get breakfast.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Conrad got the disposable camera from his jacket. He held the camera at arm’s length, stared into the lens.

7

They ate pancakes and drank coffee at the truck stop.

Wanda said, “He wants to know what you’re doing.”

“How’s that again?” Conrad sipped his coffee stoically. His arms prickled. An antiquated paper spread before him on the table, recently plucked from his wallet where it was kept safely tucked behind Imogene’s washed out graduation photo. Imogene had stolen the abstract from a government archive, although it was doubtful anyone missed it; the design was a relic of the Cold War, back when the KGB had teeth and CIA operatives smoked Lucky Strikes and knew how to kill with the mysterious techniques of Judo. He unconsciously covered the ink blot splotches with his hand.

The muscles in Wanda’s face twitched. “I wonder, is all. Where are you headed, really?”

“I’m looking for someone.”

“I think I feel sorry for them.”

“Me too.”

While Wanda was in the restroom Conrad paid the tab and left a tip for the burly rancher’s daughter who’d cleared the dishes and pretended not to notice the apocalypse of his features. He couldn’t decipher the waitress’s name tag. His eyes watered and stung.

Conrad finished the dregs of his coffee. Wanda’s pack of cloves was tucked under the rim of her plate. He lighted a cigarette, indifferent to the NO SMOKING sign above the door. He held the sweet tang for a while, trying to burn the taste of bile and Wanda from his mouth.

Wanda did not return from the bathroom.

Conrad glanced at his watch. Tony Kite would be waiting. He stubbed the butt on the edge of the saucer, walked out, started his car and drove west.

Today was Imogene’s birthday; her third since she’d run away with Raul Lorca.

8

Dust hissed against the tin walls of the fireworks shack. Here, somewhere in the Nevada hinterlands, the anatomy of the world was baked prairie and emaciated scrub; sulfur pits and the petrified bones of gangsters. Mountains stabbed the horizon. Beyond, were rivers and green valleys and farms. Or maybe nothing but a maw, an esophageal tube and a hell of acid and darkness.

Conrad wasn’t betting either way. He stuck a cigarette in his mouth and paused, head cocked, to appreciate the ghostly intonations of the wind, its slithering veil of grit.

“Yo, amigo,” Tony Kite said. He was shorter and lighter than Conrad and his arms were carved up with prison tattoos. No business suit today, no power tie or gold cufflinks; today he wore a chambray shirt with burn holes in the breast pocket and ingrained dirt at the collar, jeans bleached grey, threadbare moccasins. Tony Kite, in his heyday, had been the wunderkind of a premier contractor with offices across North America and Britain. His success, as he often elaborated when exceptionally stoned, relied upon having friends in the gutter and lower—namely Quentin, Huntsville and Folsom, to hit the marquee attractions. Right then, gazing at the gathering storm, he sounded less than placid, which was as close to high emotion as he usually got. Here was a man who’d survived prison riots, looked down the drain pipe of a Mafioso’s .45 and escaped from the trunk of a moving car during a botched kidnapping in Bogotá. Not much fazed him. “Who’s the girl?”

“What girl.” Conrad knew, though.

Kite shut the batwing doors and jerked down the stainless steel skirt. He peeked through the slats. “The one in your car.”

“Damn.” Conrad lighted his cigarette; the corona of his Zippo’s flame illuminated boxes and bundles and stacks of firecrackers, cherry bombs and M-80s. He sat and smoked, impassive as a Gila monster. He hadn’t told Kite about the women, wouldn’t have known where to begin.

“She your squeeze?”

“No.”

“She followin’ you, man?”

“Apparently.”

“She a pig? Oh, shit, man. She a Fed? A spook?”

“No. I don’t know. That’s the other pair I told you about. Well, they aren’t Company. NSA. Same difference.”

“The pretty boy and the goon.”

“Yes.”

“Spooks are the worst. My grand pappy was Army intel in WWII. Creepy bastards.”

“Didn’t your company deal with intelligence people.”

“Course we did. More you get to know them, more you hate them.”

The shack rocked and clattered in the throes of a powerful gust. A miniature cyclone skittered across a patch of ochre light, collapsed into itself after a dozen or so torpid revolutions.

Kite said, “God, you look like you been through a wood chipper. Givin’ the crowd a show?”

“It’s nothing.”

“A flesh wound, huh.”

“Is she still there?”

“Uh, yah. She’s still there.”

Conrad smoked. Each inhalation made him aware of his battered ribs, the bloated mass of his spleen.

“Maybe you better reschedule this meet.”

“Why?”

“Never mind, never mind.” Kite stared out the crack at the blowing dust, and presumably, the woman in the Cadillac. “I wonder who that bitch is, man.”

“I assume we’re green light.”

“Sure, man. Green light. It was expensive…”

“Okay. How does fifteen percent above duty sound?”

“Sounds like me and my old lady are going to Costa Rica for the winter. Although, why take sand to the beach, eh?” Kite turned from his post to wink.

“Give me the news.”

“Right. I got the Brazilian; he’s a fuckin’ butcher. My people, that’s what they say—he’s a butcher. He did some illegal plastic surgery in Beverly Hills, blinded some producer. The cops want him bad.” Kite went to the register and brought back a photograph.

Conrad took the photo. It matched the surveillance shots baby sister Imogene had snapped back when she was spying on Dad at the booby hatch, although she hadn’t truly grasped the implications, she’d simply been following woman’s intuition, bless her dark, little peach-pit of a heart. Nonetheless, this was the Brazilian, alright. They’d met several times at the Cloister. Dr. Souza was old as dirt then and nothing seemed to have changed during the intervening decades.

“Well, the Brazilian’s a menace. Did freelance work for Lockheed-Martin, DynCorp, plus some Podunk outfits. He got drummed outta all of them. Had an international rap sheet long as my arm, before this Beverly Hills action. Guy likes psychotropic and designer poisons. Don’t know why the hell he switched to surgery—he ain’t much good at it, ha-ha.”

Pain, suffering, cruelty. “They have this thing about transformation,” Conrad said.

“They?”

“There’s a conspiracy.”

“There’s always a conspiracy. I gave him the quiz, like you said. Did the Twenty Questions bit. Told me to tell you, ‘Drake is the Prince of Darkness’. Said he’ll deal for the codex.”

Conrad thought of the manuscript safely hidden in the wheel well of his Cadillac. A bundle of desiccated vellum sheaves bound in catgut, throbbing like a chunk of plutonium or a piece of concentrated darkness. Imogene’s gift to him and the one piece of intelligence he’d withheld from the

Stooges. “Blood of Old, Opens the Eye. Flesh of Flesh, Opens the Mouth to Drink the Stars.” *Oh, this is definitely the real McCoy.* His palms sweated. He was done with it; question was, was it done with him?

“Man, you’d tell me if you had cancer, or somethin’.”

“I don’t have cancer.”

“Then what?”

“Revenge.” Conrad knew that Kite knew—his friend was trying to keep his feet warm by making small talk. Conrad was bad at small talk.

“Hey, *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida*, baby. I loved Genie, too,” Kite said. “Whatever you gotta do to get inside, that’s fine as far as it goes. But, come on, man. Are you really gonna let this lunatic stick you? What if it’s not authentic? Or, what if it is?”

“I’m reasonably certain it’s authentic.”

“You’re reasonably certain.”

“My father knew him when I was a boy. They were colleagues.”

“Yeah, but that’s a long time gone. Man it ain’t cool to take rides from strangers. You don’t know where it’ll end.”

“We all end up in the same place, T-dog.”

“Well, shit. Don’t make me sorry for mixing up in this deal.”

“Think about Costa Rica and you’ll feel better.” Conrad couldn’t tell Kite what he thought the serum did without sounding like a bigger lunatic than the Brazilian. “When and where?”

“Souza’s waiting in Rattlesnake. Eagle and his brother brought the dude in and got the building and everything. Not too far, man. Gotta do it soon; the dude won’t hang around forever. He’s got itchy feet on account of the pigs, you know. I get the idea we can’t really hold him. He’s got this sort of… presence. A real heavy presence.”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, man. Why, you scared or somethin’?”

“Oh, not really. I’m wondering why you’re grinning. What’s so funny.”

“It’s a *veterinarian* clinic, man. Like for dogs and shit. But it got shut down a while ago. Still got the notice on the door.” Kite laughed and stomped his foot on the rickety planking. “You goin’ to the vet. I hope he don’t neuter you on accident, man!”

“Hell, K, I hope he doesn’t neuter me on purpose. Let’s roll over to the motel and see the man. We’ll take my ride.”

Kite made some calls. His people had lodged the Brazilian at a no star motel in Rattlesnake; left him with a quart of tequila, a couple of strippers from the casino and an Shoshone strong arm with a twelve gauge dozing outside the door. Eagle and some of his homeys from the reservation would swing by and have the doc at the clinic in time for the main event.

Kite stuffed a cheap automatic pistol in his waistband, covered it with his shirt. Then he rolled a joint and smoked it. Conrad didn’t join him; he was worried dope might contaminate the procedure.

They ventured into the congealing gloom. Kite padlocked the stand as Conrad warily approached his car. He didn’t quite trust it in the creepy, blustery light, its passenger door hanging ajar, creaking with each buffet. The familiar metal gleamed dull and somehow alien, suggestive of passive complicity in this sinister turn of events. Already, dust gathered on the seats.

The girl was long gone, as usual.

9

Kite dropped him at the motel, said he’d be back in a few minutes. Conrad got the idea that his friend not only disliked the Brazilian, but was frightened of him as well. He thought it a reasonable reaction.

Conrad told the man guarding the door to take a walk. He sent the whores away too, the older of the pair comforting her sobbing comrade. Their faces were gray with revulsion and shock, although both were thankfully unmarked—Conrad was familiar with the Brazilian’s tastes. Now it was only him and the old chemist. He placed the cloth wrapped manuscript on the table, straddled a creaky chair and folded his arms across the backrest and studied Souza.

Souza resembled a petrified corpse that had been stripped of its cerements; Tutankhamen's vile grandfather, the high priest of a blood-black god. He was entirely naked. Brown as rotted vellum and desiccated and short of breath, he stood near the window, basking in the sunset. His tiny eyes shone in the gloom. "My boy! So good to see you again!" He spoke with the perfect enunciation of an educated foreigner. "When was the last time… you were very small. But my, goodness aren't you a behemoth. Destroying God's creatures to amuse the idle rich, I hear. A drink?"

Conrad shook his head. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Souza."

"What else could I do? Perhaps I should not have, I think. This thing you do for your sister—it is unwise. Very, very unwise. Are you certain you don't want a drink? Have a drink or I'll be nervous." Souza went to a cabinet. He was extremely limber and graceful for a man who appeared a millennia dead. He handed Conrad a paper cup of vodka. "I should not have come. No, I see that now. You are mad, my boy. Utterly mad. The scent of madness oozes from your pores. And your eyes are like flames." He repaired to the bed where he sat cross-legged amid a wallow of sheets and thin, stained hotel pillows. "If Imogene is dead, God rest her, there is nothing to be gained."

"Vengeance."

"Perhaps you are a fool then."

"Genie left a trail. All I can do is follow it. Go to the places she did. Collect the things she did. Speak with the people she did." Conrad met the old man's gaze at this last statement.

Souza nodded. "Yes, she visited me. Several years ago."

"Did you give her the serum?"

"Your sister is a persuasive woman. Of course I gave her what she asked. Do you possess the triggers?"

"I have two. Do you know them?"

"No, I'm but a humble chemist. Even with the serum you'll need the third."

"Then stick me. I've got names. I'll track down another trigger."

"Ms. Imogene already had them when she came to me. She was prepared and primed for the next step."

“She’s the fucking Boy Scout of the family,” Conrad said. “How did Tony find you, by the way? Disappearing from the cop radar is a talent I’d like to cultivate.”

“Your amigos found me because I wished it so. I don’t worry about the authorities, or men such as yourself. I take pains to conceal myself from Dr. Drake. It is at terrible risk to myself that I emerge to deal with you in this place.”

“You’re hiding from Drake.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Why?”

“Do you not understand the way of this world you’ve entered? The strong eat the weak. Me, you, your lovely sister. The good doctor would be happy to devour us, one by one. He’s already begun.” The old man sighed and snapped his fingers. “To business. I am pleased you brought the manuscript. I’ve sought it for… well, forever and a day, more or less. Ms. Imogene never let on that she’d acquired it when we were negotiating. I believed all she had to offer was a pound of flesh. So clever, that one.”

“Yeah. Makes me wonder what she traded instead.” Conrad hefted the cloth bundle, weighed it in a final calculation. He rose and handed the manuscript to Souza. He smiled a loose, friendly smile, having decided to kill the chemist at his next opportunity.

Souza grinned and fondled his prize. “Perhaps you’ll have the opportunity to ask her. I think this would be an unhappy outcome. I think you would be better served to slink away into the night and forget her, forget Dr. Drake.”

Night had fallen. The lamp clicked off and they sat silently in the perfect darkness of the motel room. A tongue of red and black flame rolled from Souza’s long fingernail and made his expression wicked in the shadow play. He said, “Boy, I could walk into the dark and you’d never see me again. I could reach across the small space between us and take your heart from your chest, devour it like an apple while you stared in amazement. The strong devour the weak and grow stronger. Your Quixotic impulse amuses me, however. Also, Dr. Drake would be mightily offended were I to gobble his special provender. So, I restrain myself. I simply wanted you to know I

could. I really could.” He closed his hand and the fire went out. “Shall we go, boy? Shall we go and introduce you to the Great Dark?”

10

The Rattlesnake Animal Clinic was a dead black rectangle off an unpaved street. A solitary lamp illuminated the service entrance, the merciless grilles of several parked cars. The night wind smelled of radiator fluid and cooked insects. Occasionally dust spattered the lamp while deformed tumbleweeds careened by on their migratory paths to oblivion.

Inside the blistered stucco and cement, the lair of knocking pipes and quiescent wires, at the very heart of the squalid box, was Operating Room #2. Brutal, fluorescent light seeped beneath the rumpled seal of the double doors. A radio played dim, unintelligible music, distorted the ebb and flow of whispered conversation.

The light snuffed. A man began to shriek.

11

“Time is a ring,” Imogene said. “Bye, bye.”

Conrad missed her already.

They want in. They want in. They love you, Connie.

“Super collage. Supercollider. The Drake Technique in action. There is no center and the edges are telescopic.”

The walls were dirty. How could a clinic be so dirty. Flies circled a bulb, crawled on the dangling chain. Somebody was shrieking to the accompaniment of an opera diva.

“Daddy, I’m scared,” Ezra said.

“Me too,” Dad said. The coffin lowered, then the dirt.

Conrad was scared also, but he couldn’t speak. His mouth was full of blood.

“Please look at these cards. What do you see? Quickly.”

Thumb whorls. Faces. Hell. A light bulb attended by flies. “Daddy?”

“Oh, you’ve been practicing the meditations. The Occultus Tyrranis suffers from mistranslation. It is often a bald forgery and to follow the instructions of such a tract leads to abiding misery and most gruesome consequences. Your copy is not a forgery, but you will dwell in abiding misery all the same, I think.”

“Hold his head, amigos. This will turn our friend inside out.”

The injection was delivered by an eighteen gauge needle, the kind of needle vets stick in horses, and it slid directly into Conrad’s spine.

“Hold still, my friend,” the Brazilian said. “This is going to hurt.”

It hurt.

Funny thing how most of them didn’t possess names. The *Brazilian*; the *Slovakian*; the *Russian*. Conrad was the *American* now that the former *American* was pushing daisies.

“Time is a ring, the muscle that moves the eye. Time is the sun, a ring, a mouth, a white howl in a black mouth. Time feeds on itself.”

Faces, opened. Flowers, flies. A light bulb spat and went dark. Its filament glowed like tines of the Devil’s trident.

The elk-horned man laughed and laughed through an unhinged jaw. His face was milk. He loomed above the fig trees, slapped aside their wooly branches as he came cackling. And his phallus was a medieval pike striking sparks.

“The whole shebang is utterly theoretical,” Mom said as she notched up the engine full throttle. “Go Mariners!” Her canvas-topped Supercub slowly nosed into the cliffs, folded itself to an orange ball of confetti.

Bang. The universe collapsed into a particle.

“Time runs in all directions. Time is a droplet of blood crashing into a linoleum tile. Time is a nosebleed.”

“So, Conrad. I must warn you that there are certain risks associated with this procedure. Basically, a sequence of chemical alterations will occur. A fundamental reordering of your essential components. Also, conceivably, worms could eat your brain. Shall we proceed, yes?”

“If you’re screaming, you’re alive.”

Conrad was screaming. The crowd was screaming.

The Slovakian with the devil tattoos, the replica Bronze Age helmet with spikes and horns and the replica Bronze Age bow, shot him in the leg with a barbed arrow. Felt as if a Clydesdale had kicked him in the quivering meat six inches north of the knee. The crowd loved it. Its thunder buried him and the chariot came on, a chrome-plated pile driver astride a golden cloud of dust. Cameras whirred and popped.

“They say God dwells outside of Time. He wants to eat us because He is love.”

That horsefucker of a needle rammed into his spine and kept going. It squirted a pure grade-A Cenozoic microbe comet into his blood, and tick, tick, tick.

Supernova. Light bulbs everywhere snuffed as one.

“Please examine the cards. You will be allotted five seconds for each card. Tell me what you see.”

Why were the cards covered in bloody fingerprints? Why did they make him so sick in his stomach? Sinking into the deep, deep black.

“I see. I see. Moths. Holes in the faces.”

“Time feeds itself. Time is a muscle, a mouth. Opening.”

“Stop looking at the cards. Stop.”

“But I can’t stop.”

Every shaking shudder of every hollow-eyed mountain; every slosh and slip of every bottomless cup of sea. Dust and grit filtered down from cracks, unshuttered skylights that looked into abysses.

The universe is colder than Absolute Night, yet is exploding like the blood droplet in its impact. It has begun to bubble.

Siamese twins shook hands and boarded separate cabs.

The Slovakian got a final howl as Conrad’s spear tore him from the chariot and pinned him to the blotted Coliseum sand, before the angry hyenas ate his hands, his feet, before they yanked his manhood into saltwater taffy and the crowd repaired to the bars for cocktails and appetizers, to pay its debts and celebrate with drugs, sex and rock music. Thumbs down.

“Please look into the light. Look only at the light. Now, I am going to say a word. When I say this word, the world as you know it will cease to exist. It will become something new. Are you prepared to become a superhuman, my boy?”

The cathode dilated and spewed ichor of the gods into his veins.

“Listen carefully.”

Interlude

Funny story about the first time Conrad met Marsh and Singh.

The trio collided in Mexico shortly after Imogene originally went missing along with her lover, the esteemed Dr. Raul Lorca. Conrad flew from the Aegean when he received a late night message that she was in deep trouble and needed him to get his ass to Mexico. Genie couldn’t talk, someone watched her every move. *Come quick, bro. I’m in it now*. The line went dead before she gave him her exact location.

He was a mess. The contest had been a team event, a gory recreation of some epic Peloponnesian slaughter. It got ugly, as the big-draw battle royales inevitably did—and he was one of the fortunate few to crawl away with all his original parts. He’d been stabbed and slashed, punctured with an arrow; he had cracked ribs, a bruised larynx and kidneys and was down a few pints of blood despite a transfusion. His body was a purple-black mosaic of stitches and staples. He didn’t closely resemble the smiling face in his passport photo. Other than that he was mint.

Uncle Kosokian had sequestered him in a private hospital with round the clock nurses and a team of nervous physicians. They doped him to the gills on painkillers, gave him a button to push whenever he wanted another shot of morphine and it wasn’t enough, so he downed all the tequila he could lay hands on, which was a supply limited only by his capacity to swallow.

Imogene had terrible timing, but he rolled with it, unhooked himself from the needles and tubes, lined his pockets with pill-bottles, and went hunting.

The next two weeks were a blur, a chain of blackouts. Amid the nightmarish smog of pain, Jose Cuervo, and Demerol, he managed to trace his sister to a villa on the outskirts of a poor, off season resort town near the

U.S. border. Imogene had rented a seedy hacienda with a view of a gulch that served as a dry moat. Past the gulch, spread a sloping panorama of sage, cacti and distant, heat-shimmered mesas. What had she and Lorca been doing? Nobody had an answer, not even the Bureau. Evidently she'd taken a leave of absence and zoomed off to pursue some top-secret agenda and probably get herself fired once and for all.

Conrad had a sneaking idea what she was after. What to do about it was another matter.

None of the townies knew anything helpful. Folks remembered the dark-haired gringa. She talked like a man and broke the eye of a farmer who'd pinched her ass while they shot pool at the cantina. She carried a pistola and drank from the bottle and the regulars figured right away she was a Fed, probably a customs agent, or a narc. They didn't give a damn; obviously she had bigger fish to fry than hassling any of the locals. When she stopped coming in, it wasn't a surprise. She'd paid down another month on the hacienda and the maid reported that some of her personal items were still inside. The only thing missing was her, and her car, which turned out to be a rental from the airport in Mexico City. The authorities eventually discovered the car at the bottom of a quarry, demolished by a crash and the ensuing fire. None of the charred bones inside the wreckage belonged to Imogene or her biologist companion Lorca, however.

Naturally, enterprising locals had stripped the hacienda of everything that wasn't nailed down. It didn't matter. Conrad spotted her subtle knife blaze on a living room post—an inverted arrow bisecting a heart containing: CONNIE & GENIE FOREVER. She'd hidden the important stuff in a garbage bag in the crawl space. It was exactly as she'd promised to do if something like this occurred—articles of clothing; travel brochures; sundry papers and receipts; traveler's checks; a plastic bag of Humboldt County Thunderfuck and loose .38 slugs; and a scorched envelope containing the partially exposed glossy of a man in a robe wearing a crown of antlers. Great, pointy antlers; a twelve-point buck for sure, or the world's biggest stag beetle. The man's face was in shadow, except for the rim of a widened, protuberant eye, all black, and the corner of a too-large mouth skinned back to reveal a pit. Imogene had printed Drake in the bottom corner. Not much of a likeness, not to Conrad's recollection of the smarmy old salt who'd

tended Ezra. Then a couple of film canisters and a thick packet of dossier-style photographs of various old men, their names and occupations and last known addresses meticulously typed on the reverse—none of whom seemed familiar; and a smaller collection of satellite plates of the Cloister in the Pyrenees.

There was also a book, a medieval pamphlet made of crinkly animal skin that smelled of must and dried blood. Untitled. The shell of some kind of large arthropod had been embedded in the wooden cover. The tract's leathery pages were covered border to border in ancient Greek text, except for periodic diagrams of esoteric anatomical surgeries, and more embedded exoskeletons of predatory insects.

Imogene left a note on a scrap of soiled stationary with flowers and rabbits. It said, in jagged script, *They want in*.

Conrad was far too addled to analyze the particulars of the clues, or whether any clues truly existed beyond the miasma and warp of his beleaguered perceptions. He wandered around the town, dropped ominous and inflammatory comments and set up shop at the hacienda. Maybe she would return, or if she couldn't return, she'd realize where he'd be and send a message; or, perhaps, when he'd recovered his wits, he'd discover some new scrap that she'd left behind. Mostly he stayed because he didn't know where else to go or what to do if he went there. As a precaution, he rented a deposit box at the bank and stashed Imogene's clues for safekeeping.

He hibernated, rousing occasionally for more tequila and pills. He listened to cockroaches and mice as they scuttled around his stinking, sodden bulk, and fat moths battening the dust-caked windows, thirsty for his salt and iron, his deadly sweat. Sometimes, through the grubby window notch, the sky flushed red as the skin of a balloon stretched to bursting. Titanic shadows moved behind the sun, the gaping moon. Dark shapes dimpled the red sky as fingertips denting cellophane. When Conrad dozed, Drake materialized in a bell of smoky, volcanic light, shook his mighty antlers and beckoned from the yawning archway of a cathedral. A giant in foul, sooty robes.

Conrad never fully slept as the fever licked at him with the urgency of a selfish lover.

Later, a vehicle with the headlights off rolled up during the wee hours. He was reclined in the bathtub, where he'd tumbled several hours before while looking for a spot to relieve himself, naked except for a pair of horridly stained boxers. He hazily glimpsed silhouettes reversed upon the plaster ceiling. The strangers circled the house. Their shoes crunched in the gravel beneath the bathroom window; mutters and whispers carried to his ears, pierced his delirium.

They entered through the unlocked front door and began moving from room to room. Someone shined a flashlight into the bathroom, flicked the dead light switch a couple times, and moved on without spotting Conrad's foot and ankle hanging over the rim of the filthy tub.

Stuff was getting knocked around. Glass was breaking. The men spoke Spanish and there were at least four of them. Government men? Cops? Mobsters? Conrad decided to ask.

He eventually levered himself from the tub and limped into the hall. The world rushed him in 3D; he braced himself with one hand to keep from pitching onto his face. It was dark but for bits of moonlight coming in here and there, and bobbing flashlight beams poking around. Conrad bumped into a man in a suit. The man was small and wiry, like a bird, and reeked of nervousness and aftershave.

Conrad opened his mouth to utter a greeting, and the guy jumped back, cursed, and shot him with a taser. *Whap*, prongs stuck in his shoulder and here came the juice. It must've been a supercharged model, because Conrad had been tasered before, and usually they didn't pack enough of a punch to faze him, but this one clicked his teeth together, rolled his eyes backwards and caused foam to slather from his lips.

The slow waltz in Hell began without music.

Conrad collapsed against the wall. The man released the trigger and when he did that he was fucked. Within an instant of the current's cessation, Conrad tore out the prongs and swung his arm like a baseball bat and chopped the man's throat with the edge of his hand, made jelly of the windpipe. The man fell, thrashing. Conrad stomped on his chest until it caved, and again on his groin and the man stopped moving.

It was all instinct. His rational thoughts melted into a pulsing, crimson mass. He had left a brace of pila in the corner of the hall, intending to practice in the high desert air once he recovered. He grabbed three of the javelins and crabbed through a doorway toward a moving flashlight beam; slung a spear underhanded at the shadow behind the light and got lucky. Someone grunted and someone else opened up with the heavy armament, probably a submachine gun, and the hacienda was briefly lit by strobes of yellow-blue fire. The stench of burning copper rode a blizzard of plaster fragments and sawdust.

Conrad bored into the maelstrom, collided with a body and immediately plunged three feet of steel and ash through the man's belly, then the wall, and the machine gun whirled away in a fizz of Roman candle sparks.

The last guy ran from the house and for the car, got it rolling backwards as Conrad burst onto the porch and threw his remaining pilum, overhand this time. His aim was bad because his night vision was mostly ruined by the muzzle flashes. The windshield imploded, a mass of fractured safety glass that wrapped around the driver's head and torso like a net. The car yawed, flew off the road and toppled into the ravine.

The driver crawled from the wreck and clambered up the opposite bank. He'd lost his suit coat and his white shirt fluttered among the clumps of sage, the flowing shadows of low clouds. The cadaverous moon grinned as it peeked between the pleats of glinting star fields.

The man cried out when he saw Conrad loping after him with the hitching, drunken gait of a trained javelin thrower; fired several wild shots over his shoulder as he fled. The reports came soft and ineffectual as a child's cap gun, counterpoint to the *slap-slap-slap-slap* of Conrad's bare feet against pebbles and dirt.

Conrad overtook him, a cat cutting down a wildebeest, a large shadow swallowing a smaller, and they tumbled together among the rocks and the bushes. It was a short, pathetic struggle.

When the soldiers came, they found him slumped over the kitchen table, clutching a pile of bloody wallets. According to various pieces of identification, the dead men belonged to the Mexico City police

department. No one knew why they had been sent into the country. There was no record that the excursion was authorized.

The Mexican Army took Conrad into custody. He was hauled to a basement and tied to a chair. Someone gagged him and then sprayed soda water foam up his nose to simulate drowning. Many, many hard questions were asked. After a while, the military interrogator figured out his subject was just another dumbass gringo, albeit with a hotter temper than most, who'd gotten crosswise with somebody powerful. The intelligence officer had actually cocked the hammer on a revolver and stuck the barrel in Conrad's ear when Marsh and Singh strolled in to save the day. Money changed hands and Conrad was blindfolded and taken from the torture scene.

The agents drove him across the border and the three had dinner at a nice Tex-Mex joint, then a long conversation over several platters of beer and tequila.

You're one lucky bastard, Mr. Navarro, Marsh had said. *Those off-duty cops you dusted were freelancing. Nobody seems to give a shit about them.*

Conrad explained what he did and how his sister had disappeared investigating he wasn't sure what and that the goons had probably come for her.

How did you wind up in this line of work? Singh said.

A family friend knew a guy who knew a guy. I was recruited and trained. Conrad didn't go into specifics—how he'd been tested, the nature of the training or where it occurred; didn't speak of those early years in the modern day slave pits of the underworld, how he'd probably killed two of every species, including men, that might've walked, hopped, or slithered up the gangplank of Noah's Ark. He didn't mention how Uncle K had scooped him from the mean and bloody amateur ranks and become his patron, his master.

Marsh and Singh drank excessively and hung on his every word, although they didn't press, not then. In those early days of Conrad's burgeoning stardom as a blood sport personality, *The American,* he'd paid taxes to an NSA slob named Furillo. The NSA kept tabs on the underground fighting rings, most especially those as elaborate and lucrative as the ones Conrad belonged to. The power of those exorbitantly wealthy organizers of the

Pageant sufficed to keep the intelligence community at least nominally neutral, but graft was the order of the day and payoffs were necessary at every level of operation. So many palms to grease, so little time.

After what Singh referred to as “The Mexican Incident,” Conrad’s management situation underwent a radical alteration, precipitated by Furillo’s timely coronary conclusion due to the ingestion of multiple prescription medications and the able ministrations of a Vegas call-girl who conveniently vanished without hanging around to clarify the circumstances of “Big Joe’s” demise.

The operatives stepped in without skipping a beat. They took a cut of Conrad’s exhibition paydays, ran interference for him with local authorities when necessary, and promised to look into his sister’s case.

It was the start of a beautiful, horribly dysfunctional relationship. Basically the same as every other relationship Conrad had known.

Chapter Three

1

It was night when he stopped at the flashing arms of a railroad crossing. The klaxons twisted his insides. He opened the door and puked. Murderous thunder of passing flats vibrated his bones. While he was spilling his guts onto the pitted asphalt, someone climbed in on the passenger side, slammed the door hard enough to rock the car.

Conrad wiped his mouth, regarded the dark-haired girl in the denim jacket and bellbottom pants who was calmly checking her makeup in the visor mirror. A livid strawberry keloid ripened on her left wrist, partially occluded by a charm bracelet. She smelled of cigarettes and Prince Matchabelli and seemed unpleasantly familiar. One of those malleable faces he’d seen a lot of lately; it glowed a blurry white in the gloom.

“Ever wonder what’s in those boxcars?” Her voice was husky from the rawness of the country air. “Could be cattle, could be people, political prisoners on the way to Gitmo. Anything, really. See their eyes in the headlights, peeking between the slats.”

Conrad was dizzy. Concussion, definitely. Goddamn, he hoped it was a concussion. Looking at her almost caused him to be sick again. Was he hallucinating? He didn't think so. He wasn't certain of anything, even gravity.

"I'm Rhonda. Where you goin'?" Her eyes were small and lively. She nervously rifled a leather handbag with a peace symbol stitched on the flap. "You don't mind, I hope…? I was freezing out there."

He hadn't noticed her at the crossing, hadn't seen her at all. She likely planted herself nearby, hoped to catch some poor sucker who got blocked by the train. Popped up like a trapdoor spider.

Rhonda nodded at her bag. "So… where'd you say you were goin'?"

"West." His mantra. And in truth, the answer was South if he kept on to the end. South into the magma boiling heart of the world, and onward to Hell.

"Cool. Me too." She lighted a clove cigarette, glanced around the interior, wrinkled her nose. "Old car you got here. Wow, is this your mom?" She tapped a black and white photo pinned to the visor; a dark woman in a gypsy kerchief smiled from the shade of an elm.

"It's a classic." Conrad stared at the train, the lights.

Rhonda exhaled gustily. "Wow. Somebody kicked the shit outta you, didn't they. You feelin' alright, man? Train's gone."

Indeed it was gone, reduced to a shadowy wedge lit by blue and red beacons. His hands shook as he put the Eldorado into gear. *Seem to fly it, it will pursue*… hadn't Ben Jonson said that about shadows? Jung knew; Hesse knew; Nietzsche absolutely knew. The Germans were canny. Conrad thought about shadows, how there were so many to choose from, how hungry and insatiable they proved to be. Relentless as cancer. "You picked the wrong car."

"Oh, yeah? Are you a psycho?" The girl smiled as if at a joke.

"It's a bad time for me."

"Well, it ain't so wonderful for me either. My last two hitches were from horny truckers. Some fun. Home, James."

Conrad sighed. "Wanda, I'm beat. I'm going to get a room and crash for the night." He'd spotted a sign that said FOOD GAS LODGING THREE

MILES. That would be the Happy Raven and it was on his list of places to go, the very reason he'd driven across the belly of the country, taken an unsanctioned bout against a no-name flak. The fight had been one of his many pretexts to lurk in this geographical region, to conduct his private manhunt within a manhunt, a veritable nested Russian doll of plots and stratagems.

The machinery was in motion. It was down to the lounge singer, the English professor or the retired politico. He'd picked the lounge singer because the lounge singer was as good as any and because the lounge singer had been a traveling man. Travel always made for interesting conversation. According to his sources, the man he sought worked the lounge Friday through Sunday, six to ten p.m., had done so for the last eighteen months. Conrad reflected that often the most slippery ones were those who never really tried to cover their tracks.

"It's Rhonda."

"Yeah."

2

Rhonda tagged along as Conrad registered in the hotel lobby. She adjourned with him to the lounge for the theatre half of dinner theatre. Five minutes and two margaritas later, she spotted a gaunt man in a razor-crisp Armani suit who disappeared through the door with the fly-spackled EXIT sign.

"Omigod—there's Raul!"

"Who's Raul?" Conrad asked half-heartedly. Too familiar faces, too familiar names. The only Raul he knew was presumed dead at the bottom of some Mexican landfill. Time for another drink. Rhonda patted Conrad's hand, promised to be back in a jiff. Her small, quick eyes had gone over to black. She smiled a shark's smile and followed the immaculate stranger.

Conrad hoped that was the end. Meanwhile, it was just him and the lush and a whiskey river. He even toasted Mr. Willie Nelson. "God bless you, Willie."

The lush wasn't interested in Willie Nelson. He was a Rat Pack man. He gazed at Conrad. "Gotta say, real clean," the lush said. He wore a silk blazer open at the neck to display a clunky gold medallion. His hard cheeks shone like a polished boot. He sat stiffly; an action figure melting under a sun lamp.

The lush called himself Marty Cardinal, although Conrad knew the man's birth certificate; his forty year old visa stamped a dozen places in the Orient, the Middle East and points between; and his dog tags said something different. But, tonight, as every other smoky, gin-soaked night for several crumbling decades, it had been Marty Cardinal. He sweated through a poorly-dyed pompadour from his last set of Dean Martin and Perry Como covers ala Tom Jones on Quaaludes. The audience of the Happy Raven Lounge, which included the requisite barside lechers and a few drunken seniors on a pit stop from their bus tour, had applauded tepidly as Cardinal ambled from the stage and listed to the dim corner where Conrad nursed a boilermaker. They'd never met before Conrad told the waitress to slip the crooner a crisp g-note and ask him if he could fake his way through *My Rifle, My Pony And Me*, but no time like the present, according to the singer as he'd ordered a round from the baggy-eyed cocktail waitress, *Put it on my tab, sweetheart, baby face.*"They sewed you up real nice, kid. Maybe you should get 'em to do you a favor and stitch that cheek of yours. It's nasty."

"Bad, huh?" Conrad's brain had reached the stage where it decided to begin shutting off nonessential functions. Everything from the neck down belonged to a fossilized cave bear. At least his gorge was staying put.

"Oh, yeah. But the old ones… boy, it looks like ya got yourself caught by a buzzsaw, or something'." Cardinal emphasized that observation by gulping his drink with nary a shudder and snapping his fingers for another Johnny Walker on the rocks and make it a double, those damned lights were hot as the hubs of Hades.

Conrad resisted the urge to touch his own face. Obscured by fresh bruises and the jagged cut that had scabbed quite dramatically, the underlying scar forked from his hairline, paralleled the orbital of his left eye; another branch hooked behind his cauliflower ear. A venerable scar, among the first in his expanding collection.

Conrad fell away from the ticky-tack tables, the guttering votives and swan-necked men in polyester suits, plunged down the black shaft to a lonely farm in a lonely field, the abattoir lit by swaying kerosene lanterns, its concrete floor and antique drains choked with straw and dust, the leopard on his chest tearing at his face until the skin began to flex like a latex mask. All those wet mouths in the gallery, their collective exhortations no louder than a breeze sighing through tall grass; all those empty eyes brittle as malachite, radiating the coldness of serried ranks of knives hanging points-down from a rack.

Few animals were a match for a professional fighting man if the struggle lasted beyond that initial explosion of sinew and adrenaline. Amateur hour; the gallery stifled yawns and rattled ice in their drinks as the blood poured out at their feet.

Conrad had been young and sloppy. And lucky. Mr. Kosokian always retained first class medics. The plastic surgeon, a convict on a short leash, *had* been a consummate professional. With a good tan, the marks were nearly invisible.

Marty Cardinal said, “I played Vegas once. Shook Sammy’s hand, damned if I didn’t. He was a quick-draw fella. Didja know? Quick-draw. Pow-pow-pow with these six-guns like Marshal Dillon on *Gun Smoke*. It was a hoot. Dorsey! Dorsey, c’mere a minute!” He waved at the piano player, a fellow septuagenarian in an exhausted white shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbows. “Dorsey an’ me go back. Traveled the Northwest circuit together. Did a USO tour with Neil Diamond. Dorsey tickles those ivories like none other. Billy Joel called him Magic Fingers.”

“Nah, that’s what Billy’s wife called me.” Dorsey summoned the waitress and put in for fresh drinks all around. He constantly riffled a worn deck of cards, first left-handed, then right. “Any chum of Marty C., yadda yadda. Marty this guy a boxer. Looks like a boxer. You a boxer, sonny?”

“I know from boxers, Dorsey. He ain’t no boxer. He look like Rocky Marciano to you? He look like Gerry Cooney? Where’s yer girlfriend, kid?” Marty Cardinal was methodically stacking his dead soldiers in a glistening ziggurat, a sacrificial altar.

“She returned to the Mother Ship, I think,” Conrad said.

“Oh, she wasn’t a hooker, right? She wasn’t a working girl ya picked up from under an off ramp, or anything?”

Conrad smiled wryly, lighted a cigarette and pressed it to his swollen lips.

Dorsey snorted, passed his cards to and fro. He had the jaw of a horse and crooked hands blotched with liver spots. “Ah, Marty, she wasn’t on the job. College kid down on her luck. A dropout for certain—prolly afraid to go home to ma an’ pa, so she’s bummin’ around with dubious sorts. No offense.”

“You a dubious character, kid?”

“Mr. Cardinal—”

“Call me Marty C.”

“What did you do before?”

“Eh? Before what?”

Conrad gestured at the room. “Before Vegas. Before any of this.”

“Hear that, Dorsey? He wants to know about, ‘Once Upon a Time.’” Marty Cardinal helped himself to another drink. His smile was chilly.

“I heard what he said.” Dorsey studied his cards.

“You were in the Army.”

Marty Cardinal nodded. “Korea. Nastiest hellhole on the planet. Still dream about the cold. Ya been checking into my back story, eh kid?”

“Yes. I’ve been to the ends of the Earth, and here you are. In this place.”

“Huh. Hear that, Dorsey? The kid’s been looking for me. Maybe I owe him some money. Cripes, I hope ya can squeeze blood from a turnip, kiddo. My three exes cleaned me out ages ago; took my cars, my condos, the whole schmeer. How’d ya find me, anyhow?”

“Detective agency. It wasn’t difficult.” Conrad pulled a creased flyer from his wallet; a promotional shot of a younger, thinner, slickly-dressed Marty Cardinal bracketed by showgirls. The singer had scrawled his autograph across the back.

“Holy Toledo. That’s from the Sands!” Marty Cardinal shook his head in bleary wonder.

The cocktail waitress leaned into their circle, handed Conrad a cell phone; eyed him suspiciously as if he might go for her throat at any moment. “For you.”

He smiled painfully, hoping to reassure her, said into the receiver, “Conrad.”

Singh said, “Conrad, Conrad. What are you doing?” The connection was poor.

Strangely enough, it seemed these men whose stock and trade was surreptitious communication seldom managed a line clear of interference. Of course, for all Conrad knew, Singh was calling from the bowels of a slumbering volcano, or a submarine at the bottom of the South Pacific. “I’m relaxing. Conducting a pleasant conversation with friends. Yourself?”

“Conducting a what? An interrogation, you say?”

Conrad covered the receiver with his chin. “What happened after the Army.” He swept his hand under the tabletop, groping for a mike, a wire, anything suspicious.

“Whozatt on the horn?”

“It’s not Don King,” Conrad said.

Marty Cardinal and Dorsey chuckled and the glacier receded. Marty Cardinal said, “Broadway, baby. After Korea I moved to the Apple, tried to get my name in lights.”

“Who is that charming, drunken fellow I hear?” Singh buzzed.

Conrad held up a finger as he addressed Singh. “A war hero. I’m drinking him under the table.”

“Oh my, a real live war hero—is there such a thing? You must be punch drunk, poor boy. Buy him a shot for me, though. Just in case.”

“Karmic insurance?”

“Indeed. I’m certainly in the market… Look, Rob mentioned that you called earlier. He’s worried about you.”

“He’s worried about his money, you mean.”

“*Our* money. We share everything. Basically, we’re married. Please meet me at that museum in Coleville. You know the one—it’s on your way, isn’t

it? Fourteen-hundred hours on Friday. We can speak of cabbages and kings, the weather in Buenos Aires."

"*You* owe somebody money? Is that why ya got yer head busted?" Marty Cardinal had finished off another round. "That the s.o.b. who beat the tar outta ya, kid?"

"Okay," Conrad said. "I'll be there. It may be close."

"Drive like the wind, mate," Singh said. "Oh, and Conrad… I'm glad you're in one piece. *Ciao*."

"I'm touched," Conrad said, but Singh was gone. "Sorry, Mr.—Marty. And after Broadway, you moved west, didn't you? Washington, Idaho? Do you recall a man named Ambrose Drake?"

"Huh?"

"Ambrose Drake. He was a doctor—a surgeon."

Marty Cardinal's face slammed shut. He began snapping his fingers frantically at the waitress.

"Ambrose Drake. A tall, distinguished gentleman. Very dark, very ethnic."

"What sorta trouble are you in?" Dorsey glanced up from his cards. "Unless you're writin' a book—"

"I'm not writing a book."

"Then what?" Marty Cardinal gripped the edge of the table, a man clinging to a piece of flotsam in heavy seas. "What the hell ya want from me. Y-you're—this is ancient history."

"Is it?"

"I dunno a goddamned thing."

"Dr. Ambrose Drake," Conrad said. "He treated your grandson."

"Go to hell."

"Consider me the Ghost of Christmas Past. I know everything. You came to the Cloister to visit a child. You don't recognize me? I was a boy, so it's understandable. *You* I recall quite vividly. I thought you were an officer, even in civilian clothes. You had that military bearing. Command presence. Hadn't quite reinvented yourself as Frank Sinatra."

Marty Cardinal appeared ill. He gagged down an inch of bourbon. “The clinic. I dunno—”

“His name was Dick, your grandson. He had leukemia,” Conrad said. He was hardly drunk, now. His hands were steady, his tone flat with honed menace. Coupled with his grotesque scarring, his brawny shoulders and immense hands, the menace shtick was reliable. “There were a lot of people at the clinic, but I could never forget Dick either. A piano prodigy, just like your pal Dorsey there. Loved model planes and baseball. My brother called him Dicky, talked about him nonstop. Real amigos, those two. My brother had a tumor named Jake, by the way.”

Marty Cardinal spilled his drink, knocked over the stack of empties when he clumsily sopped the mess.

“Dicky’s head was always shaved…”

Marty Cardinal’s eyes leaked; his mouth hung slack and ugly with the shock of recollection, of demons loosed and ravenous.

“Leave him alone,” Dorsey said.

“Are you crying? Don’t do that. Please, I need you to look at something. Dr. Drake gave this to some of them to study.” Conrad made the promotional photo disappear and drew another tattered sheet of paper from his coat, held it near the light. The paper was papyrus-yellow, saturated with water stains and splashed by violent brush-work that resembled the craft of a demented calligrapher. “I’ve been told that the military used tools like this, back in the days when you were in the service. This, however, was originally created by Dr. Drake as a visual psychotropic, albeit inert without the concomitant verbal trigger. Uncle Sam considered buying the protocol, but passed. Have another look—you’ve seen it before.”

“Aww, no.” Marty Cardinal bawled. He covered his eyes. “Aww no, no, no.”

Conrad gaped in wonder and horror, then collected himself sufficiently to proceed with the Hoover-style third degree. “Any of these sound familiar? MK-ULTRA. Majestic Twelve. Project TALLHAT. Project Bluebook.”

Marty Cardinal hunched tighter, refused to look. Wow, a monster. Look!

“It’s okay, chum.” Dorsey slung a scrawny arm over Marty Cardinal’s shoulders and glared venomously at Conrad. “You better get. He’s got nothin’ to say to you.”

Conrad forged ahead, implacable as a steamroller. “Some say the doctor is yet among the living. Drake was decrepit when he administered the Cloister. I’d peg him at one hundred, easy. Not many folks see out a century of birthdays. Must be one hell of a medicine man, assuming he even exists. I don’t think the Drake we know ever did.”

“Who sent ya? I’m out. They said I was out. Lyin’ sonsabitches.”

“No one sent me. I’m a free agent, an inquiring mind. I want to know more about the Drake Technique.”

“I don’t know shit.”

“I suppose if the CIA had gotten around to co-opting his research they’d have given it some silly code name. Probably converted it to something absolutely unimaginative—OPERATION MINDFUCK. Bureaucrats, eh? For God’s sake, stop crying, would you.” It was rubbing Conrad’s nerves raw, the moaning and weeping, waking the lizard, the creature that always wanted a bite of something weak and vulnerable. His fingers curled.

“Screw ya, ya punk. This is bullshit.”

“You were on the team of spooks that debriefed Drake and his scientists about his “Technique.” Istanbul, summer of ’60. The CIA was just checking it out, you didn’t actually appropriate the intellectual property, probably because everyone thought it was a hoax. They were correct. So your commanding officers examined the evidence and cut the doctor loose, let him creep back under some rock.”

Marty Cardinal whined.

Conrad grinned, heartless and deranged, and tossed back a raw double vodka without removing his feral gaze from Marty Cardinal. Compassion was too heavy a load this far up the mountain. “But a couple decades later when poor Dicky got sick, you didn’t hesitate, not for one second, did you? You’d sensed something in Drake. You knew he was the real thing, that he held the power of life and death in a big way. Sadly, it wasn’t about helping your grandson. Dicky was, how do you military folks say it?—expendable.

Nah, you offered the poor little tyke up to the dark gods in a black magic ritual at the doctor's clinic. You'd have done a lot worse to become a high wire Vegas act. Irony of it is, that sadist probably didn't even need your grandson, or any of those kids, to fuel his experiments. I think Drake accepted sacrifices because that's just how Satan gets his kicks. Cruelty to mortals."

"Go 'way," Marty Cardinal said, muffled into his hand.

"Examine the drawing and I will."

"Go 'way."

"Look at the drawing," Conrad said with bared teeth. Then, softly, "I'm sorry, Marty. Truly, I am. You were there. Most of the others are gone, or missing—and my time is short. I can't leave until you look at the drawing. So look."

"You prick," Dorsey said.

Marty Cardinal sobbed, but he spread his fingers and stared at the piece of paper for several seconds, until his bloodshot eye began to blink rapidly and overflowed and he covered it again. "I wasn't a spook. Nope. Thass just a color field. A fuggin' Rorschach, maybe. It don' mean nothin'."

That's what they all said, more or less. "Oh, it bears some significance. Try again."

"Not to me. Not to anybody. It's a fuggin' inkblot."

"When your grandson concentrated on the drawing what did he see?"

"You prick," Dorsey said.

For a long moment Marty Cardinal remained hunched, his frame sagging in grief. Then he said, "Barbs."

"Barbs," Conrad said.

"The Barbs of God. Dicky was eleven years old. The last three months of his life, God is all he talked about. How God was going to eat every one of us. *You too, grandpa. You too*." Marty Cardinal pointed at Conrad. "You too, ya lousy sonofabitch."

"Sixty-four-thousand-dollar question: Dicky had a word. A trigger. What was it?"

“Whah?”

“The trigger, Marty. The auto-hypnotic trigger. Short, pithy, maybe a tad sinister.”

“I don’ remember.”

“Yes, yes you do. I don’t think you’ve forgotten anything about Dicky. No matter how much you drink, you won’t. My father never got over what he did to his son, either.” Conrad studied the shrinking glare of his cigarette coal, contemplated touching it to the web of Marty Cardinal’s thumb and index finger. Marsh or Singh would’ve carted the crooner to a private location and done exactly that, would’ve done a hell of a lot more than that, in fact.

“Why ya wanna know the word? Takes more than the word. You gotta look at a whole shitpot a pictures like that one there, listen to some scary recordings. Whole series of injections. There’s a chemical protocol. Word won’ help ya.”

“I’m aware of the protocols. Intimately.”

“Ya took the series?” Cunning surfaced in Marty Cardinal’s watery eyes. A glimmer of viciousness and well-oiled deceit. “I read the numbers once… the injections kill six outta ten. Drives three point five more bugshit mad. Ya took the series. No wonder you’re… It was the Brazilian, huh?”

“The process has been refined. It’s a nine in one shot, thanks to modern medicine. No series anymore, not like rabies.” *Thanks to Dad. I’ve never been so proud.*

“Ya took the Series. Dumbshit. Now they own you. *He* owns you. Dumbshit.”

“We’ve got a lot in common,” Conrad said. “It grows late, Marty.”

Marty Cardinal must’ve sensed doom in Conrad’s lazy expression. “Yeah, fine. Ya wanna know the magic word, I’ll tell ya. Ain’t a state secret, is it? Whatch ya deserve, I guess.” He half leaned, half sprawled across the table, cupped his hand and whispered the trigger into Conrad’s ear.

Bang.

The world ended.

The world was remade.

The fingernail chasm between destruction and creation was a frozen, howling void, a hairline fracture on the windshield of the onrushing cosmos. It flickered through Conrad's mind, writhed in microbial convolutions, etched itself into a secret expanse of cerebral membrane, a trilobite embalmed in Paleozoic flowstone.

The lounge sat there, relatively unaffected.

Conrad dropped the paper and it blackened and crisped to ash. Now with the primal rush of aggression leaching from his nervous system he was bone-tired and weak and slightly ashamed of what he'd done. He smoked another guilty cigarette while Marty Cardinal wept and Dorsey wiped his friend's nose with a napkin and muttered epithets. In a bit the old men lurched from the table, exited through the enigmatic door with the blinky EXIT sign.

Later, when the other drunks were migrating in pods and the bartender began to sadly sweep, Conrad made it to his feet and drifted down the long corridor of swollen, subterranean murk to his room. Empty, thank Christ and the Four Horsemen.

He fell across the bed and sank exactly as a stone dropped edge-first into the sediment far beneath the scales of the sea.

3

He awoke, although that was not a certainty. His thoughts were sticky, his faculties stupefied. He knew he was in a hotel on planet Earth in the Southwest of the continental United States. This he knew, of this he was certain despite the fact gravity and vertigo conspired against him, despite the open mutiny of his racing heart and shrieking nerves.

The room throbbed with bloodless light, the ashen flush of a landscape under the caul of an eclipse. The amniotic light sluiced against cheap blinds, dripped and seeped through chinks and seams, patterned great, ominous shadows against the clapboard walls. Somewhere, a fan clattered in its cage, a radiator churned.

He was paralyzed. The hotel around him became a translucent honeycomb where nothing stirred in the twilight chill. Rows of beds with lumps of humanity nestled tight.

An inverted female shape hung midway in the gulf beyond the bed and before the opaque blinds. The woman floated, spread-eagle as a Vitruvian Woman, hair flowing against the dingy carpet, her features a sulfurous smear amid velvet and ink. She emitted low static, the electronic snarl of radio waves creeping through the outer regions of solar vacuum. She resonated a Hadal thrum, seethed and roiled like a swarm of wasps in a hive of bones. Her dim shape accumulated mass with each snick of the clock. She achieved a dreadful aspect and unfathomable density and began to uncoil as angel hair, the wings of a man o' war, a hungry wasp.

(Doyouunderstandwhatishappeningyouunderstandwhatishappeningunderstandwhatishappeningwhatishappeningishappeninghappening?)

He struggled to lift the anchor from his chest and then nothing.

4

Conrad was alone when gray morning filtered into his brain. He showered and shaved and noted that his bruises were rapidly healing. Marks of violence giving way to simple weariness, the pouches and bags of encroaching age. Dented, but serviceable.

He drove for hours, sluggish and dreamy, imagining the serum, broken down and reduced to its naked, predatory mode, spiraling through his nervous system, clinging and entwining like morning glory wrapping creepers around a trellis, yearning for heat and sustenance. His fingers tingled, felt detached. The flesh of his cheeks was cool as porcelain. Muscle spasms and tremors. No hallucinations, no blackouts at least. No superhuman powers, either; no cosmic leaps of intuition, no burgeoning sense of godly omnipotence. All quiet, except for numbness and occasional nausea.

The city lifted itself from the flat-backed plains as a colony of blue-bottle glass and aerodynamic steel. Everything was polished to an antiseptic gloss; the boulevards ran in perfect geometric grids and russet leaves collected neatly in gutters and along curbs. Citizens wore winter suits and winter

haircuts and were scrubbed bone-white to match the sky. They moved with clockwork precision, aboard shiny Peugeots and BMWs, and on the hoof in their Gucci's and stolid sensible wingtips; the buildings and the people were clever miniatures of the mighty eastern metropolises poured from a bag of jacks.

Conrad liked that the exchange was to occur in the Coleville Museum of Natural History, a massive and modernized brownstone where the halls were so quiet, the creak of his shoes echoed, chased after grains of dust in hidden corners. Following a ludus there was always an exchange, a greasing of the palm; traditionally the transfer was resolved in an exotic locale; a catacomb; a mosque; a half-collapsed amphitheater along the Turkish coast; atop the ramparts of some rundown castle in Scotland; precisely the canvases upon which Conrad performed his cruel and terrible art. Singh relished such melodrama and Singh called the shots. The museum was an improvement for the simple fact it was indoors during the day in a warm, cheery, if naturally, illuminated environment. Conrad was only sorry they hadn't adhered to their usual conclaves. A public rendezvous complicated the situation immensely. He calmed himself with the idea that he'd think of something ingenious when the moment of truth arrived.

He waited near a towering cube which enclosed wax simulacrums of Neolithic tribesmen hucking spears at a rampant smilodon. Conrad's visage hung in a panel of glass. *My brothers, my brothers!* He concentrated on rebuilding his image after the patterns of the government inkblots until his reflection wavered and ran with the fluidity of oil and—

—he was among them shoulder to shoulder in the arid dawn pale as a flood of dying starshine the sun an ochre smear above fields of bloody grass he waited on smiling death spear in hand animal musk fear musk in his nostrils upon his grimy skins his own skin and that dreadnought was coming for them belly low amid the rocks and weeds that killing machine coming for them coming through the bloody grass with its mouthful of knives coming steady for them as a falling tree a wave an avalanche of bloody rocks upon them hungry as fire for their flesh as fire is hungry for the bloody grass but he stood his ground he had his brothers he had his spear here the monster came silent and hungry as a shadow crossing the earth—

The hunter who most resembled Conrad was sideswiped and folded double under curved strokes of black-splattered ivory; head askew, he grinned at Conrad and said, “They Who Wait have always been among us, brother!” Then a tusk dipped into the hunter’s cheek and a sticky sundew replaced his rude features.

Conrad blinked and there was beautiful, exotic Singh sliding toward him, serenely passing through grainy sun shafts thrown down by phalanxes of skylights. It struck him with a sudden, nauseating clarity that Singh was nothing so much as DeKoon’s enigmatic counterpart, the pallid European’s negative. Conrad was disconcerted to picture that duo ferociously coupled upon a bed in some ramshackle bungalow, yin and yang, the Ouroboros swallowing its tail while earthquakes rocked the Andes and a cloud blotted the sun.

Singh waved, desultory and unaffected, inconspicuously attired, according to the fashion of the natives, in tones of steel and coal. He was tall and slim and dark as the bark of an ancient madrone tree. Singh was the chameleon in the madrone tree’s branches. He said, “Say, is that luggage ticking, old bean?”

“Hello.”

“Hullo. My, my, aren’t you lovely as a corpse.” Singh embraced him lightly, kissed his forehead. The dusky man wore heavy, foreign cologne. He gleamed unctuously. “Did you see the Tyrannosaurus on the first storey? Astonishing!”

Conrad extricated himself from Singh’s grasp, hefted the briefcase. “That isn’t a T-Rex.”

“Wot, wot?”

“Nothing. Shall we?”

“No rush. I’m on vacation. Let’s nip off to my flat. Not mine, it’s a corporate timeshare, but anyway. You look like you could use a drink.”

Conrad shrugged as if the suggestion meant nothing to him. His chest constricted and his breathing came shallowly. Red sparks dashed mini novas against his eyelids. “Lead the way.”

As they walked along the promenade, he was tempted to scan the surroundings for Marsh or whoever else lurked behind the potted plants. He didn't quite dare. Singh would know.

My fly is open.

"You drive," Singh said when they left the museum and stood on the sidewalk in the austere light of a gathering storm. Snow was possible. Meteor showers.

Is this a capture or a kill team? Is Singh black-ops? I don't think so, but damn, maybe. Doesn't matter; it all ends with a gunshot, a dose of something unpleasant from a syringe. DeKoon won't be happy when I disappear. Unless he really was off his rocker about the Finn. Damn, maybe that was it. One strike and he called in the dogs. Or maybe he's a member of the club. Forget it. Get your game face on. Zip your pants, idiot.

Conrad couldn't detect any telltales that his car had been tampered with or searched. Then they were accelerating through the clean streets. Conrad was on automatic. He vaguely registered the myriad hyper-accentuated details—how a goodly quarter of the neon shop signs were in Korean or Thai characters; the bare-boned shade trees, stark and comatose; the lowering clouds, faceless as a mob; the flesh of his lumpen, knobbed hands had begun to wattle and wrinkle, blue-veins bulging as he clasped the wheel. The hair on his knuckles was gray. Tired skin, tired blood. A man could pump all the iron he liked, muscle got old sooner or later, Jack Lalann and Arnold notwithstanding.

"How did your conversation with Mr. Cardinal go?" Singh lighted a cigarette.

"He revealed the secrets of the universe."

"The secrets of the universe are of scant interest to a brute such as yourself."

"I wanted him to sign my vintage LP. He promised me backstage passes to a Neil Diamond concert." Conrad hit the brakes to avoid colliding with a taxi. He seized the diversion to scan the rearview mirror for a tail. Lots of cars back there.

Singh braced his left hand against the dash. His hand was soft and sinuous as the weaving head of a viper. “Do you really take us for total morons?”

“I probably shouldn’t answer that one.”

“To blazes with your personal issues. Your bloody agenda is only permitted so long as it aligns with ours!” Singh’s face was tight. He relaxed with a visible effort. “You’ve been too obvious, too indelicate. You’re starting to attract enemies. I would not be surprised if MI6 is out for your balls after that brouhaha with the Honduran expat last year—what was his name?”

“Kimosa.” Conrad punched the gas, jarred Singh back in his seat.

“Right. Kimosa. I guess the fellow thought you’d come to cut his throat; raised quite a stink with the consulate, I gather. We just tied that to you—all very hush-hush, you see. How did you find him? Never mind, stupid question. Your sister did the heavy lifting, didn’t she. You just pitched cleanup on a bunch of worn down geriatrics. I doubt the majority of them understand what it is you think they know. His relationship to TALLHAT would’ve never occurred to me if we hadn’t confiscated those documents on the island.”

“So, Cardinal played for the Company. Lots of my friends do.”

“The booze hound was indeed a Company man.” Singh gazed at the stop and go traffic, loose-limbed and disaffected as usual. “Wicked stuff he got up to in his day, I must admit. The chap is from the old school—I’m shocked he didn’t pop off to his garret and down a cyanide pill after you forced him to divulge his secrets.”

“I didn’t force him to divulge anything. I asked nicely.”

“Did you get anything useful? He was never trusted with any sensitive information.”

“That’s what he told me.”

“Look, Conrad… something has happened.”

“No shit. I thought this was a social occasion.”

They left the metropolitan core, crossed into stark regions populated by grimy warehouse fronts, liquor stores and low income housing complexes stacked in concrete blocks.

It grew steadily dimmer, God’s thumb on the dial.

5

Conrad parked on the street and followed Singh up steps littered with pigeon droppings to a security door of the Wanderveldt Apartments. It was a tall conical building, a decrepit 1950s tenement riddled with tunnels and chambers like a termite colony in a grey stump. Singh thumbed the button by 203 G. MOTT and shortly, they were buzzed in without comment.

The foyer was damp and papered by dead leaves. A wheezing, shuddering elevator with brassy wall plates raised them to the third floor, deposited them in a claustrophobically narrow corridor that went on and on under a series of dim globes, many of which were broken out, or blank as glass eyes. Flies shrilled in the dark globes; tiny, damned souls searching for the light. Rough plaster walls were scarred by fissures, brown water stains and occasional jags of graffiti that almost made sense to Conrad if he regarded them from the corner of his eye. Voices seeped through the plaster, mingled with the complaints of the flies. Pipes groaned.

Singh knocked at 203 and waited. He pinched open a pack of Gauloises, stuck a cigarette in his mouth and offered the pack to Conrad.

“Thanks,” Conrad said, noting the many pizza delivery fliers before the door, an iris-dilation in the peephole. Sweat greased his face, made the briefcase handle slippery in his fist. He slowed his breathing, forced his neck to relax.

Singh lighted both cigarettes with a match from a small wooden box that he’d carried for as long as Conrad had known him.

“Un momento, por favor.” Locks rattled.

The door swung into a darkened space, rich with incense, hash and underlying mildew. First Singh, then Conrad on his heel.

A blanket of jungle-ripe humidity smacked Conrad in the face. The door shut and it was full night, except for a sliver of light probing beneath the drapes of a window somewhere to the right. Ghostly classical orchestra echoed from another room. Brahms at work. Someone giggled—bubbly and feminine. The record skipped and began again.

“Don’t move,” Marsh said from the darkness behind Conrad and to the left. Phosphorescent green light bloomed. Marsh stepped around and played a crackling wand over Conrad’s shoulders, chest and extremities. Marsh resembled a hugely ursine airline security checker in cyclopean headgear and a Hawaiian flower-print shirt and Bermuda shorts. He sweated Scotch in the sultry confines. “He’s good.” He snapped the wand off and Conrad went blind with green aftershocks.

Singh switched on a floor lamp.

The apartment was subdivided into a hive—Conrad counted four flimsy wooden doors and a curtain of beads. Each door had been painted a different color: red; orange; blue; and white. The outer area had been stripped to some open beer bottles, pregnant ashtrays and a folded laptop computer on the kitchenette counter; a sectional and a moldy phone book, but no phone. Near the balcony sliding door Mediterranean incense sizzled in an iron brazier shaped like a Buddha with pronounced incisors. Conrad wondered if they’d ripped the thing off from an art gallery or a museum.

Marsh unhooked his headgear, slapped it on the counter. He squinted and rubbed his blunt hands on his shirt. His stubbly head was something that should’ve rolled from a cannon barrel. “You got crabs, Singh.”

“Indeed? You are referring to the jet Cutlass, Nevada plates, number Alpha-Charley-two-two-oh-niner? I picked him up at the museum. He parked about half a block down on the west side of the street. Poppa Z’s goons, I presume. They seem quite proprietary regarding our friend here.”

Marsh regarded Conrad. “In the old days, we just garroted guys, or stabbed them with a poisoned umbrella tip. Things are too damned complicated. We got lasers; we got masers; we got nanoviruses and white frequencies that’ll short your cerebral cortex in one-one-hundredth of a millisecond. For instance—we got a killsat in synchronous orbit, keyed to your heat signature. Actually, it’s a Russian surplus geological satellite with minor tweaks; shoots x-rays into the ground so corporations can decide where to drill. The fact it’ll cook any organic life in its projection path is a happy side effect. You can smoke just about any bunker in the world with one of these puppies. It’s all in knowing where to point it. Wanna drink?”

Conrad leaned against the wall in the pale outline where a picture had hung. He didn't trust his voice. He shook and dripped. His clothes stuck to him as if he'd strolled through a sauna.

"What's with him?" Marsh grabbed Conrad's briefcase, tossed it aside. "Going downhill fast, aren't you, killer? Don't look much like a world beater from where I'm standing. Good thing we brought you here for this little powwow. Things are getting out of hand."

Singh rinsed a couple of glasses in the sink and a dumped scotch into each. He pressed one on Conrad. "Health!"

"Your liver's got to be the size of a soccer ball. How'n the hell do you stay in shape to do what you do?" Marsh said.

It was an old question, Marsh's notion of an icebreaker. Conrad drank his glassful, enjoyed the ephemeral bite, the transitory and finite thrill, like gasoline drying on pavement. Besides frequent visits to the Big Stage, how did he maintain his edge, his dominant physical power? Ask a crocodile, fat and torpid on its sunny clay bank how it stayed fit and deadly. Same answer would apply. "If you aren't planning to snuff me, let's discuss business."

Marsh and Singh exchanged glances. Marsh said, "Snuff you? You thought —?" The big man laughed. His cheeks flushed and he hacked phlegm into a kerchief. "Oh shit, that slays me. You need to relax, son. Where do you think we are, Zimbabwe? Drama queen."

"He was joking about the killsat—the cone isn't that precise; we might get toasted as well. I would've just had one of our sniper associates do the deed at the museum. Far less messy. Here, let's freshen that a bit, yeh. There's a lad." Singh poured Conrad another dose with a trembling hand.

Why was Singh nervous? *Have I ever seen them like this?* Conrad didn't think so. Damn it, maybe they meant to kill him after the transaction, kind assurances notwithstanding.

Murmurs and a groan escaped the room with the Brahms. More giggling from beyond the white door. The humidity was thicker, stronger. Shadows swelled in the cracks and corners, began to rise in a tidal trough.

"Who's here?" Singh gestured with his glass at the white door.

“Vonda. The hooker, remember? She got here a few minutes ago.” Marsh gave his partner a bluff and hearty grin that lacked conviction. A convulsion of the jaw and nothing more.

“Wanda?” Conrad said, chilled.

“Vonda.”

“Oh! Vonda. Yes, right then. Let’s hurry this along, shall we. It would be impolite to keep the lady waiting.”

“Yeah. Meter’s running.”

The lamp flickered and everyone stared at it. Conrad’s throat was tight again; his body felt too heavy, too full of sand and water. The room seemed to have gained several gravities.

“Time to get down to brass tacks,” Marsh said, as if briskness would dispel doom. “Here’s the score. This is the kiss off. You and us, we’re through. The operation has been terminated. The operation never existed. We don’t know anything about the underground battle royales, your crazy fucking sister, Project TALLHAT, nothing. We don’t know no Conrad, Conrad.”

“Fine by me. What’s the catch?”

“We’ll be out of your hair once we’ve squared accounts.”

“Squared accounts. What does that mean.”

“Means we needs must part,” Marsh said.

“And the shoe drops.”

“The deal is—you buy out our interest in your future enterprises, indemnify us against the possibility we lose a ton profit on account of your, uh, premature demise. Say, oh, five hundred grand.” Marsh patted the laptop. “We can handle the transaction right here.”

Conrad held up two fingers. “Okay, boys. I’ll go two-hundred even, and this had better be good. Not here. I don’t trust you that much, M. I’ll retreat someplace a tad more secure and wire your payoff.” Half a million wasn’t beyond his capability, but the last thing he wanted was to hand these two jackals enough money to cap him and disappear to whatever tropical paradise they’d been lining up since they were cadets at spook academy.

Even as Marsh opened his mouth, Singh cut in, “Jolly idea. Agreed. Agreed, Robert?”

Marsh shook his head in defeat. “Do you understand what kind of guy you’re messing with? I mean, really, truly, understand?”

“The Brazilian? He’s done some antisocial things—”

“Not him. He’s a patsy, a stooge—just like your daddy was. Ciphers for the real player, the wizard behind the curtain. I’m talking about Drake. Ambrose Zora Drake. Really should a told us about him.”

The jig was up, then. They knew everything. Probably not *everything*, but more than enough. “What’s to understand? Drake killed my brother and probably my sister. Because of him my mom blew herself to hell and my dad ended up in a nut hatch. I think that covers the episodes you missed.”

“Whoa, whoa. It’s always about baby Imogene, isn’t it, bud? I looked into all that. You poor dupe. Your sister… How can I put it, Singh?”

“Delicately,” Conrad said. He dropped his empty glass and straightened.

“Hey, we’re friends,” Marsh said. He and Singh casually sidled away from Conrad’s considerable reach. “I’m just saying, okay? She might not have given you the whole story. You’re loyal and that’s sweet. But she wasn’t spotless, she wasn’t exactly true blue. I’m not casting judgment—we all gotta eat. Sis hooked up with Lorca, who is quite a dubious character, then they took a hit of the Brazilian’s wonder drug and were never quite the same. She went to the dark side. Am I right?”

Conrad looked at the floor, felt the big vein in his neck throb. “Drake is alive. Really and truly.”

“Oh, that is affirmative,” Singh said.

“Drake was the brains behind the Brazilian. Drake probably owned the Brazilian since Souza enrolled in med school back in Eighteen-fucking-whenever.”

“Why are you afraid of him? Like you say, he’s gotta be older than Mengele. A has-been on the lam from everybody with a badge.”

“Guess again, Connie. Take as many guesses as you need, even.”

“You picked Jonah’s whale for an enemy,” Singh said. “Drake is far beyond the likes of us peasants.”

“An untouchable? Counting down until the ball drops in a Nazi retirement home?”

Marsh and Singh exchanged looks again. Marsh barked and poured more liquor. “Drake runs a show you wouldn’t believe. As for Nazis, well, same ballpark. He’s a satyr. He’s Caligula and de Sade and the Pope rolled in a ball. Frankly, I bet he could buy and sell the Vatican. Guess that qualifies him as an untouchable.”

“What if he’s a terrorist too?” Conrad said.

“Plenty of terrorist masterminds are good with Uncle Sam. As of this moment, mums the word from HQ. Drake definitely has friends in our government. Get the drift?”

“Drake indulges peculiar appetites and our chain of command is at least peripherally aware,” Singh said. “There are documents, pictures… I regret having seen them.”

Coming from Singh, that was saying a lot, Conrad knew. “I’ve heard things. So what. Another rich bastard with the usual kinks. I know the type.”

“Wrong, stud. Whatever you’ve heard, I promise that ain’t the half of it.” Marsh’s eyes glittered. “Nothing is going to see light of day in our lifetimes. Records of his activities have a habit of getting misplaced or destroyed. Don’t they, Singh?”

“Oh, yes.”

“People on high have dropped the cloak of darkness over his shoulders. It’s not unusual, happens all the time. bin Laden, Noriega, guys like that were on the dole long before they became public enemy numero Uno. In some ways, it gets worse. At least for you.”

Conrad was growing cold as the sweat dried and his senses found equilibrium. “Worse. What does worse mean?”

“Drake may be the wart on the ass of an extremely large toad. Surely you figured out he’s not unique.”

“Not unique?”

“He’s junior member of a peer group, the elite of the elite.” Singh lighted a cigarette. He sighed. “The Order of Imago. You’ve probably heard of it during your investigations. It’s one of those loudly whispered secrets—like the Masons and the Satanists, only more so. Powerful, powerful men. Tycoons, industrialists, Old World nobility. A wicked old-boys secret handshake society. We know it exists. We’ve met a member or two, heard some stories. They’ve established a few communes in remote areas. There’s one in Arizona and another in Southern California. Probably five or six others. Didn’t Imogene tell you?”

“Nothing specific. Wild talk.”

The men stared at him. Their faces were luminous as wax. Mummies. The liquid giggle floated from the bedroom and Marsh’s glance twitched that direction. His tongue distended slightly. He sported the lump of a burgeoning erection.

Singh said, “Why did you lie to us about your sister? You should’ve told us from the start who she was after.”

“What, and ruin a beautiful relationship.”

“Perhaps it’s our fault. We should’ve dug a bit deeper, should’ve understood this wasn’t just about Imogene. It all goes back to your father. He owed Drake everything, didn’t he?”

“I’ve always liked you, man. So, I guess I’m kinda sorry about this.” Marsh began to tremor. He looked like a man in the throes of palsy.

Conrad picked up his glass and filled it again. He noticed Marsh had reached into his Bermuda shorts, was stroking himself. “What does this group want? Aren’t you two even a teensy bit curious?”

“Dunno, bud. Cults aren’t my forte. I’m just giving you the Action News headlines…” Marsh’s eyes went dead and his face softened, lost animation. “Sorry, Singh. I’m done here.”

“Rob—”

Marsh wheeled and shuffled to the white door. He hesitated, shoulders heaving, before he shoved open a dark slot and bulled through. No music, no giggling, nothing. Vacuum sucked the door shut.

Singh said dreamily, “Bugger it all.” He wagged his head as if it weighed upon his neck. “Did you follow that trial of a certain naughty senator. Four or five years ago? The one they say raped the intern? I had the dubious pleasure of interviewing that sterling fellow. He’d made an exceedingly strange request during his interrogation. He demanded to speak with an intelligence operative, someone involved with national security. So, in I went. The senator mentioned Ambrose Drake as a benefactor. The senator is from the oldest money, colonial bluebloods in tall hats. Kind of guys who presided over the witch trials. He made this crazy claim his ancestors knew Drake personally.”

The floor lamp began to flicker rapidly.

Something fell. Two, three, four beats and the lamplight steadied. An ashtray had plunged to the floor, dumped its contents; the brazier rocked gently on its base. The red and blue doors hung open, revealing cavities.

“Singh. What’s happening?” Conrad had fallen into a half crouch, fingers spread in anticipation of violence. His terror was muted, muffled, as if this were a dream and the floor was quicksand and it was happening to someone else, someone on TV, perhaps, an actor rehearsing his wooden lines, standing on the X.

“You know.”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be asking.”

Singh’s eyes were huge and dewy. Saliva gathered in the corner of his slack mouth. “Vonda is lonely.” He shuddered and removed his gaze from the white door. “So this hapless senator, the one with his neck on the block, swore that Dr. Drake was involved in, how shall I say, extreme occult practices. Decidedly anti-American practices. The senator claimed to have made a pact with Drake and friends in return for his celebrity status and all the fruits that accompanied such success. I relayed this story to my superior… expecting to get a laugh. Nobody was laughing. My boss quietly advised me forget what I’d been told. And I did.”

A pact.

Imogene had said it first, shouted it at him. The truth was heavy and it squirmed in Conrad’s mind. *Barbs. God will eat us all*.

Sudden vertigo and the squeak of neglected hinges interrupted Conrad's train of thought. The white door had swung slightly ajar; the pitch blackness inside had grown solid and swollen and sprung its cage.

The room rippled at the periphery, distorted and elongated precisely as it might've if Conrad had eaten a massive dose of shrooms or suffered a nasty concussion. Pressure built upon his flesh and in his bones. Objects on the counter rustled; the laptop slid several inches. The room seemed to be listing by a few degrees, a cabin in a sinking ocean liner.

"Farewell, Conrad," Singh said. "It occurred to me we owed you a parting gift, a token of our esteem as it were." He took a small packet from inside his coat and handed it to Conrad. "I don't recommend viewing these on a full stomach. Nonetheless, these disks contain all you'd ever care to know regarding the proclivities of Dr. Drake. Some in color."

"Come here." A female voice; a soft, sweet invitation that hinted of mysterious pleasure, of chocolate and peppermint, clamps and whips, a long, slow descent into the ultimate darkness of a sundew. "Come here, come here."

The lamp dulled, dulled and reddened as a beam seeping through closed fingers. Marsh called, "Tell him goodbye, Leo. I need to show you something."

Singh smiled beatifically. His shadowy face gleamed. "Goodbye, Conrad. See you soon."

Conrad didn't answer. He blundered out into the hallway and fled, following the swaying overhead lights. Someone kept calling his name.

Interlude

The first knockdown fight Conrad had was as a teenager and with his father.

Dad was a scary man. Big body, big brain, murderous temper. A scary man and a terrifying drunk. He was drunk most of the years Conrad knew him and the two seldom spoke. Dad took him aside after Mom crashed her plane and had a father-son type of chat in the cellar of their home in the foothills of the Olympic Mountains where they'd dwelt since Ezra's death. The cellar

was much larger than it appeared and housed a number of machines and assorted lab equipment. Dad spent the majority of his waking hours down there, experimenting, plotting, muttering and cackling to the rats and the spiders. Conrad would've rather had the conversation in the traditional venue—on a rowboat in the lake, fixing the junk farm truck, chopping wood, anything but the damned cellar. Unfortunately, the old man had become exquisitely paranoid in his dotage and didn't like to hang around in the open lest somebody should take a shot at him, or swoop down and roll him in a carpet and rendition him to some middle eastern hellhole for questioning.

Dad popped the cork on a bottle of Bushmill's and guzzled it, one bloodshot jaundiced eye fixed upon his son all the while. He set the bottle aside and wiped his mouth and said, *You like to fight, Connie?*

This surprised Conrad. He'd never been in trouble at school, never thrown a punch. Most of the kids liked him. Those that didn't wanted to screw Imogene in the worst way and left her brother in peace for obvious reasons. The bruisers who didn't want to fuck her were scared shitless of her. She'd socked one guy who got too fresh in the testicles with the cute little set of brass knuckles she hid in her purse. Those guys left Conrad alone too. On the rare occasion some fool decided to jump him, nothing exciting came of it. Conrad could absorb a golf club blow to the head and shake it off, just stand there and take a beating until the bully got too tired to swing. That scared people worse than Imogene's brass knuckles and pointy shoes. Which, after messing with Conrad, they experienced close up anyway.

Conrad shrugged. He seldom spoke around Dad, except in shrugs and grunts, and monosyllables.

Dad said, *You're a special case. Some of my friends in the military would be most eager to get you in their clutches. Ever ponder a career in the Marines? See the world with the Navy? No? Glad to hear it, because I won't allow it. Your mom would haunt me if I did.* And he glanced around as if Mom lurked in the shadows, ready to pounce. *Anyway, Connie. You're special and life is going to become extremely interesting for you in the Chinese curse sense of the word. This family has always been afflicted with that kind of thing. It goes back to my ancestors and I'm sorry your mom and you kids got roped into the mess. The thing is, I'm sending you to live with a*

friend of mine in the Mediterranean. He's got all kinds of connections. You'll finish school and go on from there.

What about Genie? Conrad actually looked from his feet and into his father's eyes.

She's going to live with Auntie. I have high hopes for that girl.

Don't separate us. I'll stay with Auntie too. Conrad began to fidget mightily. Sweat ran down his neck.

Dad chuckled. *First, you make Auntie nervous. Second, you and Genie are entirely too close. That's what comes of letting Mother practice all that fucking New Age child rearing bullshit on you two—way too much confusion. Not your fault, but all the same, it's best you kids see other people for a while.*

Where is she?

Gone, man, gone. They'll be on the road a while. Out of the country.

Conrad didn't say anything. He nodded and tore an x-ray machine free of its mooring bolts and broadsided Dad, sent him crashing through a domino row of shelves. He didn't use his empty hand because he was enraged, not suicidal. A fire started and Dad came out of the smoke, laughing and swearing, ready for murder.

They destroyed the cellar and then the fight moved upstairs into the main floor of the house and they destroyed that too. Dad lifted the the big stainless steel refrigerator and rammed Conrad, bulldozed the whole living room wall, and then they were in the yard, ripping apart the lawn, tearing up lawn sprinklers and whacking each other with them.

Conrad thanked god Dad was dead drunk, because it slowed the old man down a little. He threw some dirt in Dad's eyes and while he yelled and blindly pawed the air, Conrad managed to tear the Citroen's passenger door off its hinges. He raised the door overhead and slammed it down across Dad's back. It took three tries, but eventually Dad stopped trying to get on his feet, and lay there, muttering. Dad eventually crawled over to the car and got a half-full bottle of scotch off the floorboard.

The two of them slumped on the ruined grass and drained the bottle and watched the house explode in a Hollywood-style ball of fire. Dad wiped a

tear from his cheek and explained that Conrad was a special case because he'd been engineered via a cloning process and that his DNA didn't derive solely from his loving parents, but there was other source material. Material of a basic, primitive stock, an atavistic stock. That was why he looked a tad more brutish than the other lads, and why he could wrench car doors off their hinges, and why he could probably regenerate a non-lethal gunshot wound to soft tissue in a few hours. Maybe they could test that hypothesis one day…

That was also the first time Conrad got drunk. It became a trend. Turned out Dad was right about the gunshot wounds, too.

Chapter Four

1

DeKoon's men swooped in and plucked Conrad off the street as he limped out of a tavern in the industrial district a few minutes after last call. He saw them coming, decided that discretion was the valorous course, and went along for the ride in a big black limo.

DeKoon sat across the way, immaculate in his white suit and hat. A heavily painted girl in a see-through blouse cuddled him, her hand inside his jacket and circling. She wore peacock feathers in her tightly coiled dark hair and silver eye shadow. A man sat on either side of Conrad. They too wore nice suits and hats, black ones, and sunglasses. Another guy rode up front with the driver and at least two cars followed the limo.

"You appear remarkably improved since our last encounter," DeKoon said. "Still, only three weeks until the ludus. Not long to prepare for what I assure you shall be a nightmare. The Greek is hell on wheels. And, of course, he's bringing some associates and pets. A pity for you."

"Three weeks is an eternity," Conrad said.

"Yes. You're a special case. I said the same to Uncle K many, many times. We've made a small fortune on people underestimating you. You have the most remarkable endurance and fortitude I've ever witnessed. The ghost of Rasputin inhabits your skin."

“Rasputin had nothing on me. I am going to slaughter the Greek, and his pets, and his associates.”

“I almost believe you.”

Conrad closed his eyes and tilted his head back so the blood and mucus drained from his sinuses down the back of his throat. DeKoon was correct, though—he felt far better than he had any right to. He said, “Uncle didn’t have any heirs. He left you the empire?”

“Let us say I’m the executor. I represent the spirit of his interests. Your incessant meddling with the greater powers that be alarms me and conflicts with said interests. It has to stop.”

“Been talking with my spook buddies.”

“Those two are bad eggs, Conrad. You really should get shut of them. They can’t help you. They are doomed.”

“I suspect our arrangement has run its course,” Conrad said, remembering the sweetly evil voice of the woman, the cloying darkness. “Why the hell are we having this conversation? Unless you hadn’t noticed I’m pretty goddamned drunk. My face hurts. I could use some sleep.”

“Where is the woman you were with the other night?”

“Which one? Nah, I’m kidding, they’re all the same. They come and go.”

“My advice to you is to pursue asceticism and celibacy, at least until after your match. Strange women are no friends to a man such as yourself.”

“Thank you. I’ll shoot the next one who tries to hop into bed with me.”

DeKoon smiled coldly. “It’s like this. The Pageant is a lucrative hobby, a diversion. You are a tiny part of that diversion. I never shared Uncle K’s familial regard for you. The scrutiny from one such as Dr. Drake is so unwelcome, despite your entertainment value, I’m tempted to have you diced so fine you could be sprinkled over a goldfish bowl. End of problem.”

Without opening his eyes, Conrad estimated the angles of his shoulders and elbows relative the vital organs of the men who bracketed him. Both of them had their hands in their pockets, ready to draw pistols. He didn’t like their odds in the confines of the limo. “Then why don’t you?”

“Because I received a package this morning—an exquisite birch hamper of the sort used by the daimios of feudal Japan. The hamper contained several items, including a handwritten missive penned upon obscenely opulent vellum. The details are tedious. The gist was, you are not to be pureed or otherwise molested. The package was sent compliments of one R. Lorca; your sister’s lover. My nephew’s severed head nestled inside the box and the letter was inserted into his mouth. I am of the distinct impression the lad died quite painfully and in much terror. The threat to my remaining family seemed implicit.”

“Well,” Conrad said. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks, old chap. As I said, Uncle K was very fond of you. He feared you would come to a bad end. Personally, I hope you do. The sooner the better.”

“Been one of those days,” Conrad said. “Nobody loves me anymore.” And he chuckled.

The limo slowed and stopped on the corner where they’d originally nabbed Conrad. “Your sister is dead,” DeKoon said. “We would know if she were among the living. This phantom that teases you with ciphers and notes and well-placed rumors isn’t her. You are in a web, Conrad. The spider is coming.”

2

Connie, come to the house. Hurry. The note appeared in an email from Imogene’s old account, but he knew in his bones it wasn’t her who pushed send. He didn’t care because the beckoning plea aligned with his mood of desperation and a conclusion he’d already reached. The only place left to go was the one place the poets said a man couldn’t: home.

Three days of steady driving got Conrad across the desert and the mountains and sent him along the shadowy Oregon coast and into Washington—it had been years. He looked over his shoulder the entire way, hypnotized by the chain of headlights in his rearview mirror, wondering how many of them belonged to Dr. Drake, the NSA, or whatever sinister forces were aligned against him.

He spent a night in Olympia at the Flintlock Hotel. He could've gone the extra couple of hours to his ultimate destination, the abandoned family home on the Peninsula, but despite his strength and experience with mayhem and death at the hands of brutes and the claws of beasts, he feared the dark. The darkness of the Olympics at night was particularly oppressive—the ape in him responded to it with bared teeth.

Courage bolstered with a half bottle of whiskey, he opened the package Singh had given him at their farewell rendezvous and viewed the disk on the room computer. There were hundreds of files containing government aerial and satellite surveillance photos, a few motion picture clips, mostly ancient, and primarily concerning remote military installations in regions such as Mongolia, the Amazon Basin, Siberia, and Afghanistan. He kept clicking, certain of where it would lead, certain of what was coming—this was similar to the material he'd retrieved from Imogene's caches, except for a handful of files buried deep in an unmarked subfolder. These last, labeled CLOISTER c. 1982-83, were muted surveillance feeds of Dr. Drake's Pyrenees sanctuary.

First, a steady stream of images from the main grounds, then disjointed pictures of the interior corridors, culminating in a two minute recording of events in a large hall. Dozens of children were seated upon the floor in small groups. A pair of braziers smoked and blazed upon a dais at the fore of the assembly. The overhead lights dimmed and then the hall was illuminated by the shifting flames. Two figures entered the room and ascended the dais. Their features were hidden by cowls. Perspective was unreliable, yet the figures appeared freakishly massive, slightly bowed so the crowns of their hoods didn't scrape the ceiling. They lowered their hoods and Conrad recognized both faces, before the faces changed and became something other than human. The children panicked and tried to flee. Apparently the doors were locked, because none of them escaped the hideous fate that awaited.

Conrad watched the proceedings twice. He removed the disk and snapped it in half and sat for a time, thoughts null.

Olympia's tree-shaded streets were almost empty at dusk. He bought a steak dinner at a restaurant down the street, then drank a couple of beers in the hotel lounge; nothing stronger because he'd decided to at least attempt a

pretense of professionalism. The lounge was a cozy, mirrored enclosure, lightly populated as it was a weeknight, and mostly by tourists. A blonde and a brunette who could've been sororal twins perched on the leading edge of the bar where the light illuminated them to best advantage, reduced their surroundings to a background blur. The women wore vintage 1960s dresses and vintage 1960s eyeglasses, slippers and stockings. Probably Evergreen coeds. They sipped mixed drinks in tall glasses and watched him while pretending not to. He bought them another round and one thing led to another and he learned it wasn't his animal magnetism alone that attracted them, but the fact they were hooking their way through college.

Later, the trio lay tangled on his bed. He sprawled naked on his back and listened to them breathe. Light from the street illuminated the sleeping women, their soft, white curves, his dark and brutish hands draped against that pallid flesh.

The phone rang as he'd known with an unerring instinct that it would. The line hissed. He felt the weight of a presence on the other end. He said, "Is it you?"

"Yes, it's me," she said into his ear.

"Are you alive?"

"Are you?"

He squeezed the sumptuous ass of the brunette. The woman groaned and tucked her forehead against his chest. "Yeah, looks like," he said.

The voice on the phone said, "You met the Brazilian. You took a hit. Jesus! You're shining like a klieg against the old psychic skyline."

"I followed your instructions. Watched the films, memorized the triggers. Something's happening. I'm not certain what."

"Caterpillar to butterfly, baby."

"Is this a good thing, or a bad thing?"

"Depends, Connie. The Brazilian's serum is bad juju. All those Rorschach patterns and evil home videos are also bad, bad juju. Mind-fuckery of the highest order. Put 'em together and it's a recipe for a mini singularity. You gotta be of a certain genetic predisposition to survive and thrive. Our family tree possesses the recessive genes that react and activate. When this shit

you've done to yourself finally kicks in for reals, it'll be the biggest motherfucking trip you ever been on. Those dress up battles of yours… No human will be able stand against you. No beast will lay a paw on you. We're talking godhead in a needle, brother."

"Well, sort of sounds all right, you put it like that," Conrad said.

"Sure, except that your change is a beacon to much bigger fishes cruising the deeps. You know who wants to eat you. He will eat you. Just like he munched Ezzy. Just like he munched thousands of others. He's been around since before the ice covered the Earth. Doing his wicked deeds, striving to get larger than large. He eats the strong to get even stronger, and to eradicate the competition. He has to, because as big and terrible as he's become, there are worse. There are frightful things beneath the mountains, beneath the oceans, beneath your bed. Things even the devil himself fears."

"Fuck Drake. *You* slipped him. He must have a blind spot." When she didn't answer, Conrad said, "Drake is a man. I know how to kill men."

"His name ain't Drake, and like I've been trying to tell you, he ain't a man. You won't be for long, either. Nobody who survives the serum stays human."

"What about Dad?"

"He didn't take it. You see, the alchemical formula comes from Drake and Souza, which is akin to Satan handing the Apple to Eve, or Prometheus teaching some Greek how to make fire. For them, the inkblot cards and the serum are trappings of science designed to enthrall and enslave modern minds. A charade of rationality. Drake could simply breathe on you and transform you at the cellular level. He could snatch your brain and show you some cosmic horror that would turn your soul black. The Drake Technique is a joke, the mechanical rabbit greyhounds chase. And when Dad glimpsed the true nature of Drake and Souza, when he realized he'd made a deal not with high priests of a demon cult, but the fucking demons themselves, he opted out. Hilariously enough, he sent you to train with Kosokian, never cottoning to the reality that Uncle K was another of the diabolical set.

"I'm sure Drake had a good laugh at Dad's expense. He loves games. That's why you're still alive. Oh, and because he's swollen to such

gargantuan dimensions he doesn't get around much. He's got plenty of servitors… and if one of his agents drags you to the master's lair, you'll be sorry."

"Kosokian is involved," Conrad said. "He faked his death. He's mutating."

"Took you long enough to add two and two."

"I caught on a while ago. Didn't know *what* I'd caught on to, though."

"Kosokian's deathbed act is just a snake slithering out of its skin. Happens every few centuries after the first couple of cycles. Uncle K is a monster. Your patron has been on the scene for an eon or three. He's mortal enemies with Drake, by the way."

"There's a video of him and Drake taking a walk on the wild side together. At the Cloister." He swallowed bile at the memory of the images he'd witnessed. "Seemed like peas in a pod while munching on kiddies."

"They've got rules of engagement. Fuckers plot to destroy each other, but still get together for tea and crumpets on occasion. Lonely being a god, you see. Whole world is against you. Nobody understands you except your nemeses. I figure there's fifteen or twenty of these dark lords scattered around the world hatching their evil plans—three or four others are elsewhere in the solar system hiding in moon lairs. There's a reason the Apollo program avoided the dark side of the moon, is all I can say. The really old ones like Kosokian and Drake hate each other like fire, but they don't get it on directly too often. Nah, they fight proxy wars. How's it feel to be a proxy?"

"I don't get it. Kosokian is using me as a proxy? Kosokian's lieutenant has been warning me off Drake."

"DeKoon is a patsy. Renfield to Kosokian's Count. Except, being a dupe, he doesn't have a clue regarding the identity of his boss. Hapless bastard thinks he's protecting Kosokian's estate. Bet he thinks the master is really dead. Sad."

"There's more."

"Yeah, there is. The real reason poor DeKoon doesn't know shit, is Uncle K likes to play mind games. Drake, Kosokian, that ilk… they get a rush from sadism, inflicting terror, instilling confusion and dread. They don't

give a rat's ass about hierarchal efficiency. Hell, half the reason these *things* even establish organizations is so they can torture and torment their minions. Their own personal larder. To eat, fuck, and cause suffering is their reason to exist. The simple pleasures."

"Where are you?"

"Let's just say this is a long distance call and leave it there."

"I miss you."

"Yeah, me too. It's nice hearing your voice. But you gotta forget me."

"Not a chance, sis."

"This is goodbye. My situation is… Let's say it's not pleasant. Raul tried to kill me and he may as well have considering where I jumped to. When that knife went in I didn't stop to ponder, I reacted, made a leap across time and space and like the ol' bottle, went round and round and stopped here, in this place, and I'm stuck. One way trip, folding the fabric of the universe to beat a hasty retreat. See, going back in time is actually to travel forward, which is the way the river flows. There's no swimming against the current. I don't want you to get into a similar fix—and you will, you keep fucking around with the ineffable."

"C'mon. You left the clues. You *want* to be found."

"Gonna rescue me, Connie? You're a sap. I love ya, man. Ain't gonna happen, though. Frankly, I never thought you'd actually track me down. You're a resourceful dude. You need to realize, I'm not the one who's fed you the tidbits lately. I quit a while back, once I realized you couldn't save me… what would happen if you did. Raul's had you on a hook for a while now. You're getting played, fool. My former fuck buddy has a bone to pick with our family. He's on the hunt for you."

"Jeez, sis. What's a guy to do then?"

"Get on your horse and ride into the sunset. Avoid that fight in the desert. The forces of evil 'TM' will be watching. Go underground. Cash in whatever you've got squirreled away and retire. Live like a king on that island. Forget me. Forget Ezzy. Forget us all. This is an elevator ride to hell, bro."

"I love you." He didn't know what else to say.

There was a long pause before she said, “One more thing. The house is dangerous. Don’t go there.”

“A trap?”

“Yeah. Dark side of the moon. Lose the girls. Do that soon.”

“What girls?”

“Don’t be an asshole, Connie. Someone sent two of them, didn’t they? The brides of Dracula you fucked tonight? In case you haven’t noticed, you’ve attracted groupies like flies lately. Not to burst your bubble, but you ain’t that cute. One of your enemies has thrown these devil bitches at you for months. They ain’t what they seem. They’re decoys sent to spy on you, drain you, weaken you for the kill. You’re getting to be a beast, so Drake or Kosokian sicced twins on your sorry carcass. Don’t even dream you can handle that kind of action if it gets rough. Another thing. My amigo Lorca is probably lurking nearby. You see that motherfucker, start shooting, no questions asked. Meanwhile, scram.”

“I’ll try,” Conrad said. “Sorry you and the boyfriend had a falling out.”

“Remember, time is a ring. Don’t go near the house. But, if you do, watch your ass.” She hung up.

“Who was that, baby?” the blonde said, nails digging into his arm. Her eyes were large in the dimness. She nuzzled his shoulder and fastened her lips to his flesh.

“Yeah, who was that,” the brunette said. She’d swiftly raised her head in the manner of a predator. Her eyes were also very large. She dipped her chin and licked his nipple.

“An old flame,” Conrad said. “Go to sleep, girls.” He concentrated, visualized waves of lethargy radiating from his core. The women yawned, relaxed, and soon were snoring. He watched the light from the streetlamp thicken to red, and after a while, he extricated himself and dressed and left the women muttering and snarling in their sleep.

3

The two-lane highway wound through forested mountains. As the sun rose, he turned onto an unmarked dirt lane and eased along the overgrown track

for nearly a mile before entering a field. The Navarro family home lay near the center of the clearing, rebuilt shortly after the tragic fire during Conrad's teenage years—a two story wooden structure with a peaked slate roof, walls painted in shades of green and brown. The government had picked up the tab, sent in an army of contractors and laborers, and the whole building was restored in weeks like the phoenix from its own ashes. Conrad had watched this miracle of industry and finally grasped that his father was involved in some heavy duty shit for the powers that be to take such an interest in his welfare. Imogene rolled her eyes at this epiphany. She'd said, *Late to the party as usual, you big, dumb bastard*, and smiled sweetly and punched him in the arm.

He parked near the front porch. He fastened a cestus with two inch spikes to his left hand and forearm, strapped knives to his belt and ankle. The yard was overrun with weeds and grass. Moss clumped on the roof, vines dripped from the eaves. He smoked a cigarette and watched the golden light spear through the surrounding trees and ripple across the grassy field. By contrast, the dark windows of the house were cavities, pits.

The spare key was hidden in a coffee can covered in leaves at the end of the porch. He unlocked the front door and stepped into the foyer and smelled its closeness, the rich, mildewed damp that pervaded such long-neglected habitations. Lamps glowed in alcoves here and there, but the house was otherwise steeped in dusty gloom. Conrad bowed, inhaled, and concentrated. As if his consciousness dilated and partially detached from his body to float along the hallways of the building, he gradually became aware of every bolted door and sealed nook, every minute vibration of scuttling termites and flaking plaster. Mice foraged in the cellar, the hundred-fold cabinets and closets. Spiders hung like opals in their webs. Mold bloomed on the sills. But this was the sum of organic life present. None of the Honorable Opposition lay in wait for him. He was utterly alone.

Conrad had left home for good on his eighteenth birthday when he walked down the drive to catch the bus for the airport and his decade-long sojourn in Crete. Glancing at the austere furnishings reminded him that they'd lost the last of their familial history on the day he'd fought Dad and the house burned. The paintings and knick-knacks, the photo albums, Mom's library… all reduced to ash and scattered across the field and among the fir

trees. This place was a rotting shell. He knew instantly that Imogene had never come back either; the only familiar human scent belonged to Dad and that too was stale as the collecting dust.

The cellar door and surrounding surfaces were forged of steel beneath the walnut paneling. The lock was secured by an electronic keypad. Dad hadn't shared the combination and it was doubtful with his eidetic memory that he'd bothered to write it anywhere. Conrad briefly pondered smashing the door with a sledgehammer from the garage, or trudging out to a mining supply company for dynamite. Both options were problematic for a variety of reasons owing primarily to laziness and his abiding disquiet about staying too long in the house. Without focusing, he typed a random sequence of numbers and the door slid open. The numbers were simply *there* and he had understood without conscious thought that they would be. Cool air rushed forth. He flipped a wall switch and a series of naked bulbs caged in iron lattice illuminated intervals of the stairwell that curved downward into gloom.

Dad's experiments were congealed in beakers and tubes and Petri plates. In his day, he'd spent as much time crouched watching ants moil in the dirt as he did peering into a microscope or at a computer monitor. There were as many tracts and tomes of philosophy and folklore upon his library shelves as treatises of medicine and chemistry. The elder Navarro had believed, as did the ancient philosophers of the Far East, that the cosmos ultimately revealed itself as a repeating pattern, an infinitely replicated superstructure contained and embodied in a galaxy, down to a drop of blood.

Poking through the maze of rusty, dusty equipment, overseen by murky photographs of Tesla and Einstein, Conrad missed the crazy, ruthless old drunk. Unfortunately, this abandoned lab was no Fortress of Solitude and Dad hadn't been any kind of Jor-El. There wouldn't be a journal or a stash of secret recordings to lay his innermost thoughts bare, to offer a pearl of wisdom or an oblique symbol of rapprochement. There was only dust and rust and bad memories.

The center of the laboratory was empty space amid four support beams. The rest of the room was cluttered. This inefficiency was inexplicable. He studied the concrete, its patina of water stains, its chips, cracks, and concentric grooves that funneled into a shallow basin. He ran his fingers

over each support beam, searching for the hidden switch, the concealed button, his inquiry guided by intuition and cynicism. The inward face of each beam bore an inscription that together formed a quartet of glyphs obscured by a thin coat of plaster. The beams were of basalt. Dad had had them trucked in special. Conrad didn't recall any carvings, but obviously Dad got funky after the kids left the nest. The stains on the floor weren't from water, either. Too dark, too ominous. He hung his head. "Oh, Pop. What have you done?"

Spilled a few drops of claret to propitiate the black gods, what else? the ghost of Imogene whispered. *There's a vicious dagger stashed in a drawer somewhere. Look at those Tesla coils, those tuning forks. He was trying to open a door in space and time with vibration and sympathetic magic. Whatever came through would be famished, natch…*

So Dad really had been a magician, a sorcerer, corrupted by his association with Kosokian and Drake and the Great Dark they represented. Imogene was right about everything. *He sent me and Genie away. Maybe he possessed a shred of decency. Maybe he wasn't all bad.* He wanted to believe that, but he also recalled Uncle K's oblique comments regarding Dad using Genie as a weapon and holding his remaining son in reserve. That didn't strike Conrad as particularly wholesome. *No, my preservation is just another kink in a plot only Machiavelli could truly appreciate.*

"Ah, we meet again." Dr. Raul Lorca detached from the inky backdrop and stood directly beneath one of the lamps so his emaciated figure was striped in shadow. He wore a handsome suit and his hair was dark and soft upon his collar. Conrad estimated Lorca to be of early middle age, despite his sallow flesh, its tightness across his jaw and cheeks. Elegant and a refined in a vaguely aristocratic fashion, it wasn't difficult to see why cynical Imogene might've been smitten. She'd always fallen for the worldly types; at least for a ride or two. Lorca glanced at the posts and said, "My, my. A summoning circle. Dr. Navarro was conjuring demons with the blood of babes, eh? Quaint."

"Hi, Raul. Last time we talked you were fucking my sister. I got a feeling I liked you better then."

“You’re too jealous of Imogene to truly like any man. On the subject of procreation: am I to understand you were a test tube baby.”

“Somatic cell nuclear transfer cloning,” Conrad said. He slid a foot to his right, putting a table of beakers between himself and Lorca. “I was carried to term by Mom. That makes me a real boy, huh?”

“Who donated the material?”

“Kinda personal.”

Lorca smiled apologetically. “I confess, the questions are rhetorical. Imogene told me everything, although I don’t think she knows the half of it. Your father combined his material with that of at least two distinct species. Early Homo sapiens, possibly Cro-Magnon, and something much older, a DNA strand only a select few have encountered. A missing link, unless I miss my guess. The fascinating question would be, where did he acquire these cells. As that psychopath Kosokian is your patron, your father was also nurtured by a powerful man. Granted, they became enemies once your father ultimately grasped the enormity of the being he’d allied himself with, its arch plan to enslave the planet. Meanwhile, Dr. Drake procured the cells because he had a tremendous interest in witnessing the birth of a superman, knowing full well you’d become his servant one day. Unlike mere mortals such as Imogene and myself, you were unique *prior* to Blooming. The serum simply sped the process along. Now…”

“I’m not a flower.”

“Yes, you are. A poisonous night-blooming flower. How else could I have winded your scent and flown here to greet you? You snatched every clue I laid down for you, my brutish sleuth. You would Bloom or die. Simple.”

“Did Drake send you to fetch me?” Conrad said.

“Heavens, no. He’d either make me a thrall or devour my essential salts if I were foolish enough to come near him. Your sister wished to kill him, foolish girl, while I simply desired the secret to immortality. I’m my own man with my own designs and I’ve hunted you for many moons, as the indigenous types say. It was very difficult to bide my time, to wait for you to fruit.” Lorca tilted his head and smiled shrewdly. “I wonder—what on Earth did you give Souza in exchange for your shot? Imogene and I bartered a veritable pound of flesh to receive ours. The Brazilian is wholly

Drake's creature. More than human, as it were. Drake inducted him to the immortality club ages ago, made him a chief servant. As I said: I shudder to speculate what Souza extracted from you in return for his precious elixir. Come, won't you level with an old family friend?"

"You didn't like Dad."

"Lucky guess."

"Nah. I see those rows of genteel shark teeth and think, this guy is a predator. He only opens his mouth for one reason."

Lorca clapped in merriment. He shook his finger at Conrad with mock rue. "I confess. I hated him. Dr. Navarro killed me when my name was Enrique Valdez. He *thought* he killed me, I should say. I was revived and given a new identity, a new face. Those bastards at the CIA actually slotted me right back into your father's department. This was about five years after I recovered from surgery and learned to walk and talk again, learned to answer to Raul instead of Enrique. The cretin never caught on. Every day I thought of murdering him, oh yes. I longed to repay him for ruining my face. He'd burned it with acid. Such exquisite agony. The plastic surgeons did a credible job, but it always felt like a mask. Nearly drove me insane.

"Although, I've since reverted to my former countenance, if not my birth name. This is how I would've appeared if that lumbering ox hadn't mutilated me. To Bloom is to gain ever increasing control over one's molecular structure, one's electromagnetic field, to reshape one's form to fit one's needs. It feels good to be myself again, if only superficially. It feels good to be immortal."

"Shit, Genie was on the money about Dad murdering some poor schmuck, huh? So, you're the poor schmuck. That's an interesting tale. By the way, I'd rather you didn't call my dad a cretin. Speak no ill of the dead and whatnot." Conrad rolled his neck and shoulders, willed his muscles to loosen. He tried sending a cone of sleep at the older man, but the cloud dissipated and he couldn't seem to concentrate on generating another. He said, "How come my dad tried to kill you anyway?"

"A long, complicated, and boring story. I stole a bit of research and funneled it to my government. Nothing to do with the Drake Technique, so-called. We were designing a bio-weapon based on small pox. He caught me

red-handed. We struggled. I was no match for a giant like your father. Not in those days. How I would savor a chance to replay that scene today… Years passed. Here we stand. The father is dead, yet lives on through his son."

"Imogene isn't with you," Conrad said to gauge his reaction. He slid another six inches toward the wall. "I take it Pop doesn't live through her."

"We've parted ways. A lovers' quarrel, I'm afraid."

"Let me guess. Since you didn't join Drake or one of the other immortals I can only assume you intend to form your own powerbase. Man like you needs an army if he's going to stick around. Sis wouldn't have your superbaby, would she?"

"These dark lords are ruthless and cunning," Lorca said. "The only way for lesser lights such as myself and your sister to survive their predation is to either hide or band together. She would not listen to reason."

"She finally realized who you were, I bet."

"Yes, all was revealed after we completed the cycle. She means me harm. She is an angry and vengeful woman. This animus must run in the family."

"Where is the angry woman?"

"Far away, I dearly hope. Doubtless Drake has her in his clutches. She wouldn't leave well enough alone. Forget her. I'm here for you, Conrad. You've accomplished much these past few weeks. Yet this a delicate juncture, despite any sensation of heightened prowess, you are exceedingly vulnerable. It wouldn't do to have you wandering the countryside in your emergent state. Too dangerous."

"I suppose you're going to take me to the mountains, teach me the ways of the mystical arts." Conrad gripped the edge of the table with his left hand.

Lorca drifted closer without moving his feet. He stood in silhouette and his form blurred and warped in the dimness, seemed to gather size and density —the impression of wings, an aura of a black halo. "Don't you believe I want to help?"

"My old man did you wrong and died before you got to even the score. I also think you've done something to my sister. Not much chance of us being friends in either case."

“Wrong,” Lorca said. His face had broadened, its bones thickened, the flesh gone waxen and hard. No longer quite human, but a creature feigning humanity. “You and I will be much more than friends.” Even as he spoke he accelerated toward Conrad, hands hooked into claws, lower body impossibly motionless. He’d gained nearly a foot in height. His mouth gaped black as an eel’s. He was the image of a diabolical being sprung from the page of some book of demonology.

Conrad flipped the table in the same instant Lorca moved, and Lorca batted it aside as if two hundred pounds of metal was actually a Styrofoam prop. Conrad dove and rolled and slung the throwing knife he kept in his jacket. Lorca flinched and the blade skipped off the bone just above his temple. A pearl of blood formed and Lorca kept coming. He grinned. His teeth were jagged and many.

“Is that why you hung around with Genie? Revenge?” Conrad bounced to his feet and managed to get another table between them. Lorca had eased back, coiled into himself for another strike, and was in no hurry. Obviously if the man couldn’t torment Dad, the only surviving male heir would have to do.

Lorca stopped. He pressed his thumb to the blood, studied it. “At first, yes. Once I realized what she’d stumbled onto, what your father and Drake had accomplished, I delayed my plans and assisted her in gathering the puzzle pieces. I grew quite fond of her, in fact. A shame. Although, it still amuses me that she didn’t catch on until the end. Like father, like daughter. She really had no idea who I am. Silly little girl playing with guns.”

While Lorca was talking, Conrad gathered his reserves and tried again—he visualized the man bursting into flames. It was a strange sensation, a psychic weight in the center of his brain, the mental analogue to pushing rope. Pins and needles stabbed the length of his spine and his vision blurred. He pushed harder.

“What are you doing, Conrad?” Lorca said. The wound in his head widened and blood poured in a rivulet, dripped steadily from his collar and splashed on the concrete floor. “You can’t win. This is a rigged game.”

“Genie seemed confident I could kill you.” Conrad had gone through the same fire as Imogene and Lorca. The man obviously possessed the ability to

shift shape, to manipulate his mass and strength. Whatever he could do, Conrad could do, if only he knew the trick.

Lorca said, “Nonsense. Imogene is… it’s not possible that you’ve spoken with her.” The man leaped again mid-sentence. Conrad reversed tactics; he pulled the table toward himself and used it as a shield. Lorca raked it and steel shredded like tissue paper. Conrad plucked a ten inch sliver of shorn metal and stabbed Lorca’s neck, rammed it clean through the opposite side. As Lorca reeled, hand clapped to his leaking jugular, Conrad punched him in the ribs with the spiked cestus, then the kidney, driving into the blow with every ounce of force he possessed, which would’ve sufficed to shatter a cinderblock, to rip a hole through a wet sandbag, or rupture the internal organs of a normal man. Lorca uttered a gurgling cry, and back-handed Conrad across the cellar and into the wall. Conrad curled, knees to chin, the air slammed from his lungs. He wished he’d brought a gun, although that hadn’t helped Imogene, had it? His thoughts were unclear; the room dimmed to infrared.

The scientist grasped the steel sliver and pulled it from his neck. Blood spurted and foamed. His face and chest were thick with blood. He was unrecognizable. His right eye shimmered and glared from the gore; it burned like a coal. “Allow me to return this,” he said, and approached Conrad and caught his ankle and lifted him as a doctor hoists a newborn. Conrad scrabbled at the floor, trying to find purchase. He had a moment to consider whether anyone had ever gripped him with such animal strength, then the scientist stabbed him in the thigh with the shard and twisted.

Conrad didn’t scream, although he wished to. Imogene whispered, *Jesus, bro. Didn’t you get your ass kicked the last time you came down here?* He beheld her then: nude and lithe, pinioned near the apex of an obsidian pyramid that jutted from a mountain of skulls. Her arms were chained above her head and she shone brilliant as a diamond prism. Light beamed from her flesh—white, then red; a nova that wiped the image from his mind, but left an imprint on his retina.

He laughed.

Lorca dropped him in a heap and frowned. “What is amusing?”

“See, in a life or death struggle,” Conrad said, pausing to cough a bit of blood, “when your enemy starts laughing you don’t stop to ask why, you finish him before it’s too late. Too late, sucker.”

Lorca kicked Conrad in the ribs hard enough to make him writhe. The second kick was less forceful, and the third thudded from Conrad’s side without effect. Lorca stepped back quickly. Nubs of horns bulged from his skull and his breathing whistled and keened high upon the register.

Conrad had gone about this all wrong, projecting malice at an enemy who was prepared for such a gambit. Perhaps inward was the answer. He imagined himself whole and strong, imagined his flesh as iron, his muscles as cables, his heart a furnace. He imagined a keyhole opening. Streams of dark and light flooded into his mind like oil. He stood. Lorca swiped at his collar and Conrad slapped his hand away and grinned. His teeth felt large and sharp. His was the physical strength of a great ape. Three great apes. The joy of his rage was more powerful still.

“Damnation,” Lorca said. “You catch on fast—”

Conrad grabbed his throat and squeezed, felt the windpipe go, then the spine, and squeezed hard enough to snap a railroad spike, reduce a stone to gravel. With a renewed burst of vigor, Lorca jerked free and attempted to run. Conrad leaped and drove his knee into the small of the man’s back while yanking his chin up and to the rear until several large bones snapped. Lorca’s muscles convulsed. Then his tongue protruded and he was dead. To be safe, Conrad fetched an axe and chopped the corpse into several pieces. He loaded the remains into a barrel, doused them with kerosene and struck a match.

He rested on the front porch and watched the greasy smoke coil into the sky. His sense of triumph was tempered by the regret he hadn’t had the opportunity to torture Imogene’s whereabouts from Lorca. While he rested, the steel splinter spontaneously worked itself from his leg and clinked onto the ground where it smoldered and bubbled. A few minutes later the wound sealed itself to an angry red pucker surrounded by deep tissue bruises which rapidly faded.

There wasn’t even a scar.

4

Conrad stayed in Vegas for the week preceding his showdown with destiny. DeKoon reserved a penthouse suite in the glitziest casino, provided him with a limo, guards, call girls, and an unlimited tab at the front desk. Conrad banished the girls. The gorillas in the mirror shades kept a respectful distance. A fearful distance. He sat lotus before a wall of glass that overlooked the desert. He stared into the distance and, when night fell, into the blackness between stars. That week every sunset was red, every night moonless.

On Saturday night DeKoon collected him and whisked him off to witness the heavyweight mixed martial arts champion of the world defend his belt in the trademark steel cage. The champion went down in the fifth round and as the fighter's head bounced on the canvas, a few drops of blood splattered the breast of DeKoon's impeccable white suit. The brunette on his arm squealed and dabbed it, then licked her finger as she smiled coquettishly and crossed her long legs. Conrad glanced at the crowd packed around the harshly illuminated stage: a sea of shadows fractured by camera flashes, its denizens hunched forward like carrion birds.

"Two of the most famous warriors on the planet," DeKoon said, hand on Conrad's shoulder, "and you could tear them apart, rip the stuffing from them. Likely at the same time. Couldn't you? I'd wager anyone in our top fifteen could take these guys. What a shame the luminaries of the Pageant must toil in obscurity."

"The wheel goes round. I'm sure the taste for real blood will hit the mainstream again one fine day."

DeKoon glanced at the crimson-lipped brunette. "I think you're on to something, my friend." He leaned over and kissed her, savagely, possessively, and she grasped his hair and pulled him in. A pair of beasts feeding upon one another.

Meanwhile, doctors rushed to tend the fallen champion. The stage burned beneath a column of white light while all else faded to black. Imogene appeared again as she had at their house. She floated atop the column of light near the vault of the roof. She loomed, naked and glistening with

blood and sweat, larger, by far, than life. Her wings beat slowly and crackled with fire. Like the archangel Michael, she carried a sword and its blade dripped flames that scattered into sparks as they fell toward the unheeding throngs below. She blew him a kiss as her body brightened and flared and disintegrated into the darkness.

Almost over, Connie. The brunette kept sucking DeKoon's face. She winked at Conrad. Her eye glowed with the reflection of the stage lights.

5

The cargo hold of the helicopter was windowless and lighted by a red bulb in a plastic case. Conrad sat alone in the cavernous hold and listened to the rotors churn. He had no idea what coordinates the pilot bore him toward, only that it would be a remote and deep desert location where death and glory awaited.

He slept and dreamed of being trapped inside a cave, of cowering in animal terror while beyond the mouth of the cave twilight cloaked a primordial landscape. A terrible presence impended upon his hiding place. This bestial presence hunched until its crown of antlers scraped rock, and it chuckled and growled and reached for him, clutched him and drew him into the light. His flesh was shredded, his bones cracked, his blood poured down a ravening maw.

He awakened as the helicopter landed.

Engineers and laborers had further excavated a massive crater near the foot of some low mountains, reinforced it with granite pillars and entrenched amphitheatre style bench seats, with all the grandeur and scope of an ancient pyramid construction site.

Cold dusk had settled over the land. Floodlights glared from a ring of conning towers. Film crews positioned themselves atop strategic roosts along the rim of the crater. Several hundred spectators had assembled between granite colonnades. The guests were garish as peacocks in their collective attire. Men with automatic rifles patrolled the perimeter.

Conrad wondered, as he often did in the moments before a ludus of this size and complexity, how many millions of dollars had gone into the

preparations, the construction, the bribery of God only knew how many law enforcement agencies and military personnel to steer clear, to divert attention and provide cover. Who were these pampered and pompous spectators? Foreign royalty, Balkan financiers, sons and daughters of Hollywood, of Washington D.C., the bored and bloodthirsty scions of Western industry, and fake celebrities? Their identities were a mystery, for the organizers of the Pageant scrupulously enforced a policy of non contact between athletes and patrons, but the crowd's desire was plain; that desire charged the air.

Adrenaline smoked in Conrad's nostrils, his lungs. He'd stripped naked in the belly of the chopper and donned his harness of battle, the boots and plumed helm; armed himself with a brace of pila, the cestus, and a gladius meant for chopping men to small pieces. He needed little else.

Pageant attendants escorted him to a staging area where he was consulted by a tight-lipped surgeon and a team of assistants. Conrad was offered an impressive selection of pills and injections—drugs to pump him up and inure him to pain, or drugs to sand down the edge and keep him calm, depending upon his strategy for the battle. He declined and sent the medics packing. DeKoon waved from the curve of a pillar a few yards away along the crumbling lip of the crater, then leaned back into the shadows and Conrad was alone. He regarded the stars while announcements crackled over speakers, introducing the main event of the ludus in several languages.

A youth, dressed in a toga and wreathed in laurels, came to lead him down the many steps into the pit. The boy warned him to watch his step on the final landing and the sandy floor of the arena proper. There had been a number of earlier matches, including an extremely messy battle royale between two dozen convicts flown in from various international prisons. The custodial crew could only do their best.

Oiled posts were driven into the ground at irregular intervals, torches socketed into the crowns. The resultant light was smoky and dull and his shadow stretched long and grotesque across the sand. Horns winded, deep, primal tones that raised the hairs on his body and vibrated in the soles of his feet.

Silence fell as the horns died and the announcements ceased and the crowd held its breath in anticipation of carnage.

The Greek's retainers awaited; elderly and vile twins, dressed in soiled loincloths. Conrad recognized them as Uncle Kosokian's creepy servants from the estate. One beckoned and dragged his nails across a stone outcropping and struck sparks. Conrad followed them away from the expectant eyes of the crowd, its burgeoning murmurs of unease and discontent. The ancients led him into a cavern that reeked of spoiled blood and charred meat.

The Greek lolled upon a throne fashioned from a pile of animal hides and armor and the shattered bones of men. More torches hissed and sputtered from crevices in the walls. Smoke tinged the air red as the heart of a stoked furnace. "Good to see you," Uncle Kosokian said. He had grown to the immense proportions of the giants from Conrad's nightmares; easily the height of three men standing upon one another's shoulders. He wore nothing except for a crown of obsidian spikes and a necklace of bloody skulls. Sweat poured from his cockles and dewlaps. He sucked marrow from a cracked femur and tossed it atop the growing pile. The ancients scuttled to positions at the base of the throne, where they hissed and made signs of obeisance to their master.

Conrad's knees quaked. His gladius fell from his hand and clattered upon rock. He said, "My, what big teeth you have, Uncle."

Uncle Kosokian's chuckle reverberated ominously. "Like certain Caesars of yore, I can't help but descend into the arena for the occasional bit of sport. I know, I know, it's unfair, undignified and a trait often derided in the illustrious. Regardless, nostalgia is undimmed by enlightenment. As a mortal, I was quite expert in the dispatch of my fellow man. To be deprived of a direct hand in such gory spectacles is a high price for godliness."

"What does this mean? Am I to be enslaved? Eaten?" Conrad could still hear the children at the monastery screaming, could see them scooped into the slavering maws of monsters. This guise of Uncle Kosokian, albeit distorted to mythical dimensions, was yet a humanoid mask of his true self. Its true self was likely more accurate. Uncle K was a man by the thinnest definition only.

“I lied about many things, Conrad. My fondness for you is nonetheless genuine. Tonight is a celebration. You stand at the threshold of transcendence. You are of the primal stock, my son. The missing link between man and animal, your cells scraped from the soft sponge at the bottom of a pond when all the Earth was muck and amoeba. You possess a purity that none alive can match—not me, nor Drake, nor your sweet, lost sister. In a few eons, when your strength has grown, you will rise to gobble up your enemies and take dominion of this ball of dirt.”

“And Imogene?”

“Stubborn, stubborn boy. Assuming by some miracle she wasn’t captured by Drake as a thrall, or murdered by that wretch, Lorca, then by all means, take her as your queen, your slave, your whatever. None of my concern.”

Conrad half-listened to Uncle Kosokian, mesmerized instead by a sudden transformation of the ancients from wizened men to a pair of the taut, voluptuous women he’d known in a dozen incarnations over the past months. Rhonda smiled with lascivious glee and Wanda tipped him a wink and thrust her hip at an exaggerated angle. Smoke shifted a veil across these apparitions and as it drifted, they were scabrous trolls once more, snickering at his expression of horror.

“My apologies,” Uncle Kosokian said. “Think of them as hobbles… impingements upon your running amok, drunk with power. Pleasure instead of imprisonment. My servitors meant you no harm. Quite the contrary—they disposed of those two baboons who’d been extorting you. Marsh and Singh were into wet work. Sooner or later one of them would’ve decided to cut your throat in case their superiors decided to investigate. I couldn’t permit such a fate to befall you.”

“No,” Conrad said, and a multitude resided in that utterance. He gritted his teeth and composed himself. “And here we are. The guests will be pissed when there’s no fight. We’ll be ruined.” He smiled bitterly at this last.

“The guests? Provender, my boy. Grist for the mill. In a moment I shall make a minor adjustment to you that you might transmogrify into an astonishing and horrific creature of legend and then we’ll shamble forth and devour them where they recline. Kicking and screaming.”

“That sounds absolutely delightful.” The voice was soft and urbane and Conrad recognized it as Dr. Drake’s. Eyes burned molten red in the darkest corner of the cave at the heart of a column of shifting darkness. The column gathered height and mass, billowing upward and outward with silent menace.

“Damn you Ambrose,” Uncle Kosokian said, lurching to his feet, which was a frightening sight. “This is my demesne. You are trespassing in violation of our covenant. Begone!”

Dr. Drake said, “I am aware of our arrangement, Cyrano. Alas, I am compelled by reasons of appetite and paranoia to abscond with the young man. Surely, in your wisdom, you knew I’d come for him tonight.”

“I rather hoped you’d show a bit of restraint. There will be repercussions. You’re ruining the lad’s debut.”

Dr. Drake emerged from his roiling cloud of blackness. He was as Conrad remembered: frail and bald with a hook nose, his lips perpetually curved in a sardonic smile. He dressed simply in a dark shirt and slacks. “Greetings, Conrad. It’s been positively ages. How’s your sister, eh? Hold tight and we’ll be off for a conversation of cabbages and kings, my little oyster.” To Uncle Kosokian he said, “Hand him over, Cyrano. All is not lost; you can still eat the folk awaiting their bread and circuses.”

“Get behind me, Satan.”

“We must destroy him. I’ve never witnessed such acceleration, such raw potentiality. Had I suspected… Let’s say I’d have taken measures. Call it a failed experiment, hubris. If we hesitate, he’ll become too strong. We must act.”

“But I am. The blood and bones of five hundred sheep will be his initiation unto godhead. The boy will make a fine ally to my cause against you, old one.”

“The servant will become the master,” Drake said.

“Admittedly I fear you in your full aspect,” Uncle Kosokian said. He cracked his knuckles and rolled his shoulders as a prizefighter preparing for the blows to come. “However, you’ve overreached by appearing within my sphere. I say again, begone!”

“Don’t be a fool. I am sufficiently manifested to annihilate you and take what I wish.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. Either way, it’ll be bloody.”

“Do you promise?”

Galvanized by a nod from Kosokian, the ancients shrilled in unison like angry vultures and hopped toward the doctor, claws extended. Drake caught each man by the neck, midair. He smashed their heads together in a shower of pulp and cast the limp bodies against the cavern wall with such force their limbs detached and flipped end over end into the gloom. He wagged his finger at Uncle Kosokian and clucked his tongue.

Conrad stared with newly sharpened senses at the doctor, a kind of X-ray vision that bored through Drake’s façade. Drake’s flesh and bones flickered and rippled and Conrad had the sense of enormous fingers inserted into a puppet. Whatever plucked the strings existed partially upon another plane and across an improbable gulf; an entity that radiated malignant hunger and rage of scarcely conceivable scale.

“Run, Conrad. And remember the little people on the day of your return.” Uncle Kosokian stooped and brought a fist the size of a wrecking ball down onto Drake’s head with the evident purpose of driving the doctor into the ground as a mallet pounding a stake. The blow glanced aside without effect. Drake laughed and a thundercloud coalesced and swiftly descended to coil around the antagonists. Strokes of blue and yellow lightning licked forth and scorched rock, blasted sections of the floor into gravel. All of the torches snuffed at once and the cavern was cast into darkness.

Conrad took the opportunity to flee, his flight guided by the intermittent flashes of lightning. The earth shook and groaned and cracks opened in the ground and raced along the walls and thick, choking dust billowed forth. The curses and cries of the combatants rose to a tumult and became the death cries of mighty beasts, the roaring of calving glaciers, of collapsing mountains. He caught his heel on a stone and pitched headlong into a chasm of hot, whistling wind and blackness edged in dull red fire—

—and found himself kneeling in the courtyard of his Vegas hotel. Only, not precisely his hotel and not the Vegas he knew, not by a long shot.

The building loomed dark and silent, a mausoleum beneath the glittering desert sky. The entire city lay motionless, silent and sepulchral. A breeze rustled a flag on a pole. The stars were not right. Brooding emptiness crushed down with the weight of the universe itself. Conrad's face was wet and he realized he bled from his eyes and mouth and nose. His blood mixed with flakes of ash and rust, and it tasted of antiquity and ruin. The moon slowly pierced the horizon and hung there, the blazing ivory tooth of a cannibal god taking a bite of the world.

His enemies would follow once they finished squabbling. He had to keep running lest Drake find and kill him. The problem was, he doubted there was any place on the planet to hide. *It's a one-way trip*, Imogene had said. Forward to the end, beyond the end to the beginning. There would be no return. Actually, there'd be a return, it would just require several hundred million years of evolution.

It all felt so malleable, the moon, the stars, the night itself. He covered his face and concentrated, and discovered that there was nothing a bit dramatic about folding space and time. He allowed his mind to fill with the blackness of the illimitable void that surrounds the specks of dust that comprise the cosmos, and from this heart of darkness he summoned an image of his sister, pure and crystalline. Her image persisted for a moment before it wavered and dispersed. His vision dilated and contracted simultaneously, impossibly. In Imogene's stead, something awesome and terrible shuddered, a stirring from the cosmic depths. He glimpsed a reflection of his own form, grown monstrous, elongated, distorted, all encompassing. A mouth, *his mouth*, yawned like a thousand black holes, eating planets, constellations, light, its own tail.

Dread overwhelmed him as the earth gave way and he was suctioned into the cathode of the universe, reduced to his constituent particles and absorbed.

6

Conrad crawled from the soup and curled into a fetal position, gasping and wet with slime. He eventually opened his eyes to a lambent sun directly overhead. His unreasoning terror receded by degrees, although it lurked and

his heart beat too fast. He lay supine on a mossy atoll surrounded by shallow, blood-warm seas. Steam drifted from the water. The sky was apple green.

"Behold the empire of trilobites," Imogene said. She gleamed. "Hard to believe there'll be little hominids skulking in yonder caves an eon or two down the road. Then flint and fire and dogs and rats. The adoption of gods and devils. Then, revenge, baby. Fiery, gory revenge. It'll be great."

"Something to look forward to," Conrad said. He shivered violently, taken with a sudden chill. Contemplation of deep geological time wasn't doing much to curb the fear in his heart, the wooziness of his brain. Nor did his sister's dark smile lend him comfort. "I don't know why I'm thinking of frying pans and fires…"

Imogene beamed her sinister smile as she reached up and casually grasped the sun and turned it counterclockwise as if unscrewing a light bulb.

A night without stars rolled over the world.

In the darkness, Imogene laid her cool hand upon his brow and her nails only dug in a little. She said, "Shall we begin?"

D T

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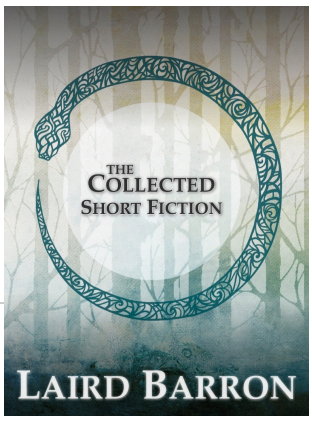


Considering his profession, it wasn't surprising that the author would occasionally tell a colorful story dredged from his past. Since his weapon of choice was horror these stories were predictably gruesome.

He'd been stabbed, beaten, burned. He'd initiated misadventures involving felonious exploits and romantic miscalculations. Now he could laugh about it, if bitterly.

The editor sometimes imagined the author as a young Viking biker on the third floor of a tenement, then the bucket of paint thinner splashed in his face, the lighter flare, a fireball, our Viking lad crashing through glass and plummeting into a row of dumpsters and trash bags. After the bounce a few singe marks, a few scrapes, one broken bone, otherwise unscathed except for a burgeoning sense of immortality. Such was the story of his youth. Charmed and cursed at once.

These many years later, the writer had swollen to mammoth proportions, an intimidating mass of muscle beneath the soft pink and gray excess of middle age, a person who was in most ways steadily vanishing from the Earth even as he expanded. His blond hair was long and his handlebar mustache luxurious. His mouth curled in a snarl during sleep. He clenched his left fist like a giant baby, like baby Hercules choking the life from the serpent.

He'd ridden a chopper and worn a bomber jacket in his heyday, had punched the lights out of pigs and rival bikers alike, done a stretch in the pen, standing up, if you must ask. The majority of the scars were on the inside. He'd snorted coke and popped pills and kept the breweries in business. After his reinvention as a pulp lit wunderkind and subsequent

ascent through the literary ranks he'd shagged enough groupies to qualify as a minor rock star.

Alas, alack, the star set as stars are wont to do.

No more bestsellers meant no more blow, no more jellybean jars full of pills, no more jellybean jars full of starry-eyed college girls; down to Schlitz and Jameson and his old Tom cat and Tom's canned cat food. Not sands through the hourglass but smoke through the pipe were the days of his life. Ghosts and demons had come swooping from the wings to bear him away to Valhalla in a plume of fire.

He tossed and thrashed in his slumber and sweated like a man gripped by fever. His lover, the editor, didn't know how to help him. When it got bad, and lately it always was bad, she smoked Benson & Hedges and perched cross-legged on a chair, nude but for a set of cat's-eye glasses and the fancy camera as ever slung around her neck, watching intently, unable to decipher his delirious muttering. Occasionally she snapped a picture of his comatose form. He too dabbled in photography, one of the mutual loves that kept them together after other loves had sputtered and died. The pictures inevitably developed muddy and grainy as his words.

What was he dreaming?

No mask? No mask! and some bullshit about Camilla was all she got from his raving when she got anything. He'd once mentioned a nightmare of being buried to the neck in sand as the ocean tide came in while world-famous author Stephen King strode toward him decked in an ivory turban and a ragged yellow cloak that dragged the sand like a tail. What could it mean? She didn't think it meant much of anything except that he might have a complex about rich dudes like Stephen King.

He'd also mentioned being followed lately, that he, like everyone, had a doppelganger. He mused that the fucker must be intercepting his royalty checks. This didn't interest the editor—writers were paranoid. No, she dwelt upon other mysteries such as, who the hell was Camilla? Surely not the Camilla. No, surely not.

The editor was young and wily and after a span in the trenches had landed the fiction editing job at a fresh big city magazine, a science and technology-oriented slick positioned to counterbalance the publishing magnate's interest in high fashion pornography.

The author was two decades older than the editor and had recently sent his agent novel number seven. Each of the other books had dealt with swashbuckling barbarians matching steel against devils and dinosaurs, or rarely, hard-bitten PIs and their dames versus otherworldly menaces. He mixed a dash of blue collar authenticity and a pinch of literary ambition into the conventional pulp brew. Six times it worked, albeit with diminishing returns.

The agent, who was a mutual friend, had confided to the editor that the new novel was a mess, a kind of Frankenstein teleplay rather than a traditional book, that it wouldn't be winning the author any new fans in the critical establishment, that it would probably sink without a trace and drag the author's dwindling readership to the bottom. What was it about? Who the hell knew? Even the author shrugged off that question and muttered something in Latin she couldn't follow. The agent, still in confidence, had admitted to stalling halfway through the manuscript, of being unsure if he could finish it, much less muster the courage to pitch it to a reputable house.

The author made his bones with the previous six books and another hundred or so short stories, but he'd also done some time editing at weird fiction periodicals and helmed a long-running anthology series that celebrated the best short horror of the calendar year. The anthology gig was in jeopardy due to a climate shift at the publishing house.

The pair had known one another professionally for ages, of course. Genre industry being claustrophobically small, and the science fiction/horror end of the closet all the moreso, it would've been surprising if they hadn't associated at the various conventions and seminars that broke the seasons into manageable chunks. What no one guessed, not even their closest confidants, was the couple engaged romantically with varying frequency and had done so from the beginning. At the outset they'd actually taken some extended holidays together, although as her fortunes ascended and his waned, their ardor cooled. These days it was meet-ups at hotels at prearranged intervals or acts of opportunity during the aforementioned

literary conventions. For her the act had become one of charity, residual tenderness in respect of happier times.

Her job at the slick paid substantially better than his anemic sales, so when they rendezvoused once a week to screw and then go dancing she paid the freight. Mostly that meant watching him crack open bottle after bottle from the hotel minibar, or get catastrophically pasted as they waltzed from club to club. Often, their friends and colleagues would accompany them upon these expeditions, never guessing that the couple was actually a couple.

Funny part about the entire affair was, neither had ever taken real measures to keep it a secret. Insomuch as their purviews and spheres of influence made them colleagues and peers rather than supplicant and mistress or master, there wasn't much in the way of conflict of interest. Both, albeit somewhat extravagant in their public personas, were at heart rather discreet, and thus eschewed displays of public affection. Nonetheless, no one ever noted their simultaneous absences from egregiously tedious panels, or how they all too often walked out of an elevator together, or how they were usually the last to depart the publisher party at the con suite. No one asked and they didn't tell until finally "casually clandestine" became their watchword.

The sum of this being that the editor felt a keen sense of isolation here in the twilight's last gleaming, as it were. She couldn't think of a single person to turn to in her hour of need that didn't present a risk of exposure and scandal. She couldn't think of anyone who'd take the May/December romance seriously.

Thus she observed her lover's gradual decline and slipped in and out of her own increasingly weird dreams that were doubtless a sympathetic response to the man's condition.

Saturday Night. The author and editor toddled off to their city's version of the Tenderloin and settled in a hole-in-the-wall that catered to the leather and denim set. This was one of those rare occurrences that saw them alone for the entire evening. Joan Jett and the Blackhearts belted from the

jukebox, and Lynyrd Skynyrd, and George Thorogood and the Delaware Destroyers. Heads banged and glass smashed.

—Maybe drinking isn't such a grand idea, she said as he brought four double shots of bourbon to the table and slugged them one after another. It was round three for him during the past two hours. Her mostly untouched Long Island Ice Tea had sweated to death in the meanwhile. However, she'd gone through half a pack of cigarettes. —Your color is icky. Ease back on the spurs, have a soda. Come back to the land of the living.

—Hiked the Catskills the other day. There's a herd of magnificent deer back in the hills. I wanted to get a picture. Anyway. Bug season. Ticks, gnats, mosquitoes up the wazoo. Chomped the living shit out of me. He bared his arm momentarily to show off the various red lumps and bumps. —And no deer. Deer shit and ticks and a black forest.

—Maybe you've got malaria, she said, only half in jest.

Bam, bam, bam, bam! He slapped the empty glasses down and grinned at her with the indolent fury of an ancient rogue lion. He patted her hand and grabbed her cigarette and took a greedy drag. —I'm worried about you.

—Oh? Why?

—You talk in your sleep. That ain't good. Means you got mental issues. A guilty conscience.

—I don't have a guilty conscience.

—You should.

—I know, but I don't.

Stereo MC came on with "Connected." She thought the peppy beat masked cosmic horrors. A theme for the modern Lovecrafts.

He snapped his fingers to the beat. —Al died last night. Alden was the author's long-suffering agent and the author spoke of his abrupt demise with a highly affected casualness.

The editor had been away from her office for the weekend, had unplugged the phone as usual, so this news was a punch in the gut. —Holy shit. What happened?

—He was investigating a megalith in Arkham County. The thing fell. He got squished.

—You aren't funny except to look at. Jesus, what happened? I saw Al last week.

—Sorry. I don't know. Cops found him in his apartment this morning. Probably a bum ticker. The author smiled to show it didn't hurt, but his eyes glittered and the pause in his voice was too pronounced. —It'll get sorted. Meanwhile, I'm in a bind. I need a rep. Everybody loves you, E.

—I'm no agent, she said and snatched up the Long Island Ice Tea and drank most of it.

—Just for now. Push my manuscript to some of the big boys, bat your lashes, flash some leg, whatever…

—Nice what you think of my professionalism. I don't need to do that to sell a project.

—Shit, E, I know it. I'm teasing. But dead serious, you gotta help me on this. My head is barely above water. Take a peek is all I ask. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and stared into the smoky distance as if focusing on the music. —The funeral. We need to make arrangements

—Okay, okay, she said. No point in a drawn out argument that she was going to lose after a few more rounds. She loved the guy and that was that.

The author smiled and it was sort of genuine. —Gonna shake the governor's hand. He leaned over and kissed her cheek, then lurched upright, nearly upsetting the table. He staggered toward a distant alcove where the bathrooms were stashed. Yuppies and bar toughs alike cleared the hell out of his way as he approached.

She bowed her head and took a breath and asked herself what she'd gotten into all those years ago, what she was going to do.

A stranger stepped from the haze. He said, —Baby, he used to pop them pills and score them hoochie mamas because he could. Now he boozes and does dope because it's the only thing that keeps him level enough to churn out the horseshit he churns out. Except, there's not enough booze or dope to compensate. As for the hoochies, you're the last. Dig?

For a moment she thought her companion had returned from the bathroom, although that was physically impossible. Yet, the voice was correct, so too the general height and features of the man who'd materialized from the smoke and gloom. Her author was dressed in jeans and a leather jacket that no longer zipped properly. This look-alike stranger was leaner by forty pounds and wore a sports coat, slacks, and cowboy boots, all of it crisp. His eyes were hidden behind Hollywood style sunglasses, his long hair was caught in a pony tail. A brother? A cousin? The author as he might've appeared at the end of the road not traveled?

She cleared her throat and forced a smile. —Damn, sorry if my jaw is on the floor. But, the resemblance… Are you related?

—No. The stranger slid into a chair across from her. —I am the doppelganger, at your service. He placed his hands on the table. Large and pale, the left bruised and bloodied across the knuckles from some recent violence, swelling even as she watched.

The editor considered a number of reactions, a couple of them precipitous, and settled on calmness as she might've if confronted by a menacing dog. —They say everybody has a double in the world. She lighted another cigarette and studied the visitor, stalling in the hope that the author would swagger back and put an end to the scene.

Alas, alack.

Finally, the stranger said, —Your boyfriend and I met in Europe. During the war. Remember that train tour of all the old castles and museums… the one you missed? That's the year you landed your job at the slick. Yep, you were too busy schmoozing the brass to hit the road for a vacation with your ever lovin' chum. Well, he was a lost soul and some bad boys sold him worse dope and he went right off the fucking rails. I fastened upon him one night as he lay sweating and raving in his hostel bunk.

—Happened upon him? He's never mentioned you, she said.

—Sure he has. You don't listen so good.

—So well. But I do. And, shit, you're right. He did. Why are you following him? Are you friends? Enemies? An inane question, but the best she could do under the circumstances. She was nervous. Her vision swam from the effects of pounding that damned drink a minute ago…

—It’s more of a parasite/host relationship.

—A what?

—Or, perhaps, you could call me his muse. Our pal is awfully productive for a man on the edge of a complete breakdown. As he spoke, the stranger flexed his bruised hand and that reminded her of how the author clenched his fist while asleep.

The editor glanced around. Though the bar was packed, it seemed the two of them occupied a tiny island illuminated by the spotlight of a dull shaded lamp hanging from a chain. She’d dressed in her shortest velvet skirt that usually garnered leers and a few wolf whistles, yet none of the crowd seemed to notice her existence. Even the music had receded to the faint roar of distant surf.

She reached into her purse and came up with the dainty canister of mace she’d kept rattling around since the last time somebody got mugged in her apartment building. —Let’s start over. Who are you?

He smiled. Evil twitched the muscles of his jaw and spread fast. —I’m not the only one who’s drained the life from him. His fans, his publishers, the critics…

—Who are you?

—Planning to zap me if you don’t like the answer?

—Yeah, like a cockroach. She leaned forward so that the nozzle was near his face, saw her shaking hand magnified and reflected in his sunglasses. Her finger caressed the trigger.

—As you say. I am the dreadful one whom Camilla saw.

—Camilla.

—Camilla. No mask. No mask! He hissed to imitate a crowd cheering and made jazz hands.

—Oh, that bitch again. She pressed the trigger, hard.

The stranger inhaled the mist and divided like an amoeba on a slide, his face slithering, sloshing side to side, bisecting, a red crack traveling vertically crown to navel, and the lights in the bar flared black, fist to the eye socket, and back again and he’d vanished.

Far away the bathroom door flew open and the author blundered forth. Blood poured from his right eye and all heads turned to watch him pass. The editor rushed to him and supported his enormous bulk with her slender shoulder. The music crashed and boomed and everyone else ignored them again.

She shouted over the din, entreating him to tell her what happened and to leave at once for the hospital.

—Bah, I'm fine. Woozy is all. He pawed at the blood and wagged his shaggy head in confusion. The gore gave him the appearance of having exploded through a windshield. —Some bastard sucker punched me. Didn't see it coming. Don't need no hospital. Take me home, E. My face hurts.

She took him back to his apartment in a taxi and washed his wounds with hydrogen peroxide. The apartment was a sty—boxes piled up in a maze, a cat box full of cat crap, a rusty radiator thumping beneath the lone window, and on the mildewed brick wall posters of Vonnegut and Einstein, and Vallejo nudes astride prehistoric beasts, overlooking a desk poached from some defunct high school upon which rested his circa 1970s electric typewriter and a mountain of manuscript paper, an overturned pickle bucket serving as office chair; the overwhelming odors of sweat, booze, smoke, and cat. Oh yeah, she instantly remembered why she loathed stepping across the threshold.

The author swigged from a bottle of Jameson and kneaded her ass with his free hand while rambling about his novel, the fucked state of the industry, and the fact he'd lost a step if some no good rat could flatten him with a single blow.

—Honey, I swear the shithead smacked me with a jack handle.

—Shut up and hold still. She dumped the last capful of peroxide into the vicious gash that split his brow and the sluice commingled blood and tears.

Those were the last words they ever exchanged. He fell into farting, snoring slumber punctuated by moans and cries of anguish. She crept away before dawn and collapsed into her own bed in her own flat. Sunday was the only day of the week she ever had to herself and often that simply meant catching up on the myriad clerical details involved in running a major magazine.

The cops found him three days later after a noise complaint—he'd left the radio volume blasting right before collapsing in the middle of the floor, stone dead. Cardiac arrest precipitated by a swollen liver, the ME said. Liquor and drugs were the main culprits, although some reports circulated that the suffered from Lyme disease.

So the editor attended two funerals in the course of a week. Alden the agent had also died alone and of heart failure. The editor dialed back on cigarettes and alcohol for several days, glimpsing her own future in the mirror of her colleagues' fate. But the bleakness, the loneliness, proved inescapable, and so too the looming notion that her chosen life led to an ineluctable fate, and she wound up smoking and drinking more heavily than ever.

A vacation seemed in order, something to distract from her melancholy. She packed her camera, the author's final manuscript (which she'd snagged from Alden's office when she and a handful of mutual acquaintances carted his possessions into storage), rented a car and drove upstate into the Hudson Valley and took lodging at a quaint bed and breakfast near the hills where her lover often roamed. Her plan was to walk the trails and snap a few pics, shop in the boutiques, drink coffee at the corner café, and make a pass through the book if she could muster sufficient enthusiasm.

The proprietor handed her the keys to a cottage behind the main building and said to buzz if she needed anything. That first night she curled into a ball on the couch, sipped wine by candlelight, listened to a blues station on the radio, unpacked the novel from the travel case she'd stuffed it into, and read the first quarter. Working title D T, and damned if she could decipher from the increasingly esoteric text what that meant. The narrative was eerily disjointed, an amalgam of episodic descriptions of violence and sex and shadowy landscapes populated by alien figures whose inscrutable routines flashed homicidal every few pages. She nodded off and experienced dreams of the sphincter-clenching variety. The one she recalled was of fucking the author in a photo booth while the camera popped, except it was the author's doppelganger and he gazed into her eyes and whispered, It was a warning. And the photo booth became something different—panels in the wall slid

aside to reveal nozzle ports of flamethrowers, the teeth of buzz saws and augers—

She awoke with a scream for possibly the first time in her life. Following a dispirited breakfast in the main house dining room, she dressed in cargo shorts and hiking boots and spent the day wandering the wooded hills in a daze. Her legs were leaden, her skull ached, every crackling branch, every shifting leaf caused her to jump in fright, which in turn annoyed her enough to continue ever farther into the underbrush. There were no deer in evidence. She stubbornly photographed deer wallows and piles of deer scat, the meandering trails that bored like tunnels through the wood. In one respect her luck was better than the author's: most of the bugs had died or gone into hibernation and after slathering herself in repellent she suffered few bites.

Dinner at the house, which she again had to herself except for the proprietor and a bored waiter. Then she stumbled to her cottage and fell onto the couch, foregoing the customary nightcap. All day her thoughts had inexorably cycled between last night's nightmare and the nightmarish spell the novel had cast upon her.

Thus she sat by the flickering glow of a candle, the manuscript in her lap, her thumb poised to separate the pages to her previous mark. And thus she finally noticed the glossy black spot the diameter of a dime attached to her thigh, although several more seconds passed before she recognized this as the monstrously fattened body of a tick.

I fastened upon him one night…

Resisting the urge to shriek in terror and revulsion, she took a shuddering breath and snicked the wheel of her lighter and when it bloomed applied the flame to the insect. It retracted from her within moments and dropped onto the floor, leaking black fluid as it waddled for safety.

The editor snatched the block of a manuscript and walloped the tick, crushed it against the pine floorboards with an audible crunch. Blood trickled from the tiny hole in her thigh. More blood, black as an oil slick, oozed from beneath the book.

So much blood one would think… one might think…

Her head swam as it had that night at the bar and her bizarre encounter with the stranger and she covered her eyes to stop the room's spinning. She was afraid to vomit because she was suddenly convinced blood would spray from her mouth instead of the salmon and curry she'd eaten for dinner.

The vertigo receded and she steadied herself, wiped away tears and snot, and lifted the manuscript, *pried* it, from the caved-in skull of the man at her feet, and the paper was heavy, sodden with all that blood and brain matter. Gore saturated the stack from the bottom; the paper sucked it up like a sponge until darkness blotched the title page, obliterated the title itself in a Rorschach pattern of Hell.

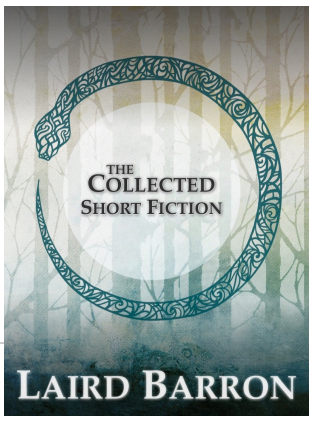
Someone knocked and the front door swung open and a figure stood silhouetted in the frame, behind it a purple twilight and the yellow moon cracked and gaping as it swooped toward the earth. The distant city should've glowed upon the horizon, but

The figure said in a voice that she recognized, —Where will we go?

—These pages are stuck together, she said. —I'll never know how it ends.

there were no other lights

Frontier Death Song



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Night descended on Interstate-90 as I crossed over into the Badlands. Real raw weather for October. Snow dusted the asphalt and picnic tables of the deserted rest area. The scene was virginal as death.

I parked the Chevy under one of the lamp posts that burned at either end of the lot. A metal building with a canted roof sat low and sleek in the center island, most of its windows dark. Against the black backdrop it reminded me of a crypt or monument to travelers and pioneers lost down through the years. Placards were obscured by shadows and could've pronounced warnings or curses, could've said anything in any language. Reality was pliable tonight. Periodically a semi chugged along the freeway, its running lights tiny and dim. Other than that, this was the Moon.

I loosed Minerva and watched her trot around the perimeter of the sodium glow. She raised her graying snout and growled softly at the void that surrounded us, poured from us. Her tracks and the infrequent firefly sparks on the road were the only signs of life for miles. Snow was falling thick, and those small signs wouldn't last long. It was back to the previous ice age for us, the end for us. I kind-of, sort-of liked the idea that this might be the end, except for the fact sweet, loyal Minerva hadn't asked for any of it, and my nature—my atavistic shadow—was, as usual, a belligerent sonofabitch. My shadow exhibited the type of nature that causes men to weigh themselves with stones before they jump into the midnight blue, causes them to mix the pills with antifreeze, trade the pistol bullet to the brain for a shotgun barrel in the mouth, just to be on the safe side. My shadow didn't give a shit about odds, or eventualities, or pain, or certain death. It just wanted to keep shining.

So, Minerva pissed in the snow and I ticked off the seconds until the ultimate showdown.

My ear was killing tonight, crackling like a busted radio speaker and ringing with good old tinnitus. The sensation was that of an auger boring through membrane and meat. My back and knee ached. I lost the ear to a virus upon contracting pneumonia in Alaska during a long ago Iditarod. The spine and knee got ruined after I fell off a cliff into the Bering Sea and broke just about everything that was breakable. Resilience was my gift, and I'd recovered sufficiently to limp through the remainder of a wasted youth, to fake a hale and hearty demeanor. That shit was surely catching up now at the precipice of the miserable slide into middle age. All those forgotten or ignored wounds blooming in a chorus of ghostly pain, reminders of longstanding debts, reminders that a man can't always outrun provenance. Sometimes it outruns him.

I checked my watch and the numbers blurred. I hadn't slept in way too long, else I never would've pulled over between Bumfuck, Egypt and Timbuktu. Since suicide by passivity was off the table, this was an expression of stubbornness on my part, probably. Grim defiance, or the need to reassert my faith in the logical operations of the universe if but for a moment.

What a joke, faith. What a sham, logic.

A hunting horn sounded far out there in the darkness beyond the humps and swales and treeless drumlins that went on basically forever, past the vast hungry prairies that had swallowed so many wagon trains.

Oh, yes. The horn of the Hunt.

Not simply a horn, but one that could easily be imagined as the hollowed relic from a giant, perverted ram with blood-specked foam lathering its muzzle and hellfire beaming from its eyes. A ram that crunched the bones of Saxons for breakfast and brandished a cock the girth of a wagon axle; the kind of brute that tribes sacrificed babies to when crops were bad and mated unfortunate maidens to when the chief needed some special juju on the eve of a war. Its horn was the sort of artifact that stood on end in a petrified coil and would require a brawny Viking raider to lift. Or a demon.

That wail stood my hair on end, slapped me awake. It rolled toward the parking lot, swelling like some Medieval air raid klaxon. Snowflakes weren't melting on my cheeks because all the heat—all the blood—went rushing inward. That erstwhile faith in the natural universe, the rational order of reality, wouldn't be troubling me again anytime soon. Nope.

I whistled for Minerva and she leaped into the truck, riding shotgun. Her hackles were bunched. She barked her fury and terror at the night. Sleep, O blessed sleep, how I longed for thee. No time for that. We had to get gone. The Devil would be there soon.

Years ago, when I raced sled dogs for a living, I knew a fellow named Steven Graham, a disgraced lit professor from the University of Colorado. He'd gotten shitcanned for reasons opaque to my blue collar sensibilities—something to do with privileging contemporary zombie stories over the works of the Russian masters. His past was shrouded in mystery and, like a lot people, he'd fled to Alaska to reinvent himself.

Nobody on the racing circuit cared much about any of that. Graham was charming and charismatic in spades. He drank and swore with the best of us, but he'd also get three sheets to the wind and recite a bit of Beowulf in Olde English, and he knew the bloodlines of huskies from Balto onward. Strap a pair of snowshoes to that lanky greenhorn bastard and he'd leave even the most hardened back country trapper in the proverbial dust. All the girlies adored him, and so did the cameras. Like Cummings said, he was a hell of a handsome man.

Too good to be true.

Steven Graham got taken by the Hunt while he was running the 1992 Iditarod. That's the big winter event where men and women hook a bunch of huskies to sleds and race twelve hundred miles across Alaska from Anchorage to Nome. There's not much to say about it—it's long and grueling and lonely. You're always crossing a frozen swamp or mushing up an ice-jammed river or trudging over a mountain. It's dark and cold and mostly devoid of sound or movement but for one's own breath and the muted panting of the huskies, the jingle and clink of their traces.

Official records have it that Graham, young ex-professor and dilettante adventurer, took a wrong turn out on Norton Sound between Koyuk and Elim and went through the ice into the sea. Ka-sploosh. No trace of him or the dogs was found. The Lieutenant Governor attended the funeral. CNN covered it live.

The report was bullshit, of course; I saw what really happened. And because I saw what really happened—because I meddled in the Hunt—there would be hell to pay.

Broad daylight, maybe an hour prior to sunset, mid March of 1992.

All twelve dogs in harness trotted along nicely. The end of the trail in Nome was about two days away. Things hadn't gone particularly well, and I was cruising for a middle of the pack finish and a long, destitute summer of begging corporate sponsors not to drop my underachieving ass. But damn, what a gorgeous day in the arctic: the snowpack curving around me to the horizon, the sky frozen between apple-green and steely blue, the orange ball of the sun dipping below the Earth. The effect was something out of Fantasia. After days of inadequate sleep I was lulled by the hiss of the sled runners, the rhythmic scrape and slap of dog paws. I dozed at the handlebars and dreamed of Sharon, the warmth of our home, a cup of real coffee, a hot shower, and the down comforter on our bed.

When my team passed through a gap in a mile-long pressure ridge that had heaved the Bering ice to an eight-foot tall parapet, the Hunt had taken down Graham on the other side, maybe twenty yards off the main drag. This I discovered when one of Graham's huskies loped toward me, free of its traces yet still in harness. The poor critter's head had been lopped at mid-neck and it zig-zagged several strides and then collapsed on the trail. You'd think my own dogs would've spooked. Instead, an atavistic switch was tripped in their doggy brains and they surged forward, yapping and howling.

Several yards to my right so much blood covered the snow I thought I was hallucinating a sunset dripped onto the ice. The scene confused me for a few seconds as my brain locked down and spun in place.

The killing ground was a fucking mess, like there'd been a mass walrus slaughter committed on the spot. Dead huskies were flung about, intestines looped over berms and piled in loose, steaming coils. Graham himself lay spread-eagled across a blue-white slab of ice repurposed as an impromptu sacrificial altar. He was split wide, eyes blank.

The Huntsman had most of the guy's hide off and was tacking it alongside the carcass as one stretches the skin of a beaver or a bear. Clad in a deerstalker hat surmounted by antlers, a blood-drenched mackinaw coat, canvas breeches, and sealskin boots, the Huntsman stood taller than most men even as he hunched to slice Graham with a large knife of flint or obsidian—I wasn't quite close enough to discern which.

Meanwhile, the Huntsman's wolf pack ranged among the butchered huskies. These wolves were black and gaunt as cadavers; their narrow eyes glinted, reflecting the snow, the changeable heavens. When several of them reared on hind legs to study me, I decided they weren't wolves at all. Some wore olden leather and caps with splintered nubs of horn; others were garbed in the remnants of military fatigues and camouflage jackets of various styles, gore encrusted and ingrown to the creatures' hides. They grinned at me and their mouths were… very, very wide.

Nothing brave in what I did, or at least tried to do. My befuddled intellect was still processing the carnage when I sank the hook and tethered the team, left them baying frantically in the middle of the trail. I wasn't thinking of a damned thing as I walked stiff-legged toward the Hunt and the in-progress evisceration of my comrade. Most mushers carried firearms on the trail. There were moose to contend with and, frankly, a gun is pretty much just basic equipment in any case. We toted rifles or pistols like folks in the lower forty-eight carry cell phones and wallets. Mine was a .357 I stowed inside my anorak to keep the cylinder from freezing into a solid lump. The revolver was in my hand and it jumped twice. I don't recall the booms. No sound, only fire. The closest pair of dog men flipped over and a small part of my mind celebrated that at least the fuckers could be hurt. It wasn't like the legends or the movies; no silver required, lead worked fine.

The Huntsman whirled when I was nearly upon him, and Jesus help me I glimpsed his face. That's probably why my hair went white that year. I squeezed the trigger three more times, emptied the gun and even as the

bullets smacked him, I had the sense of shooting into an abyss—absolute hopeless, soul-draining futility. The Huntsman swayed, humungous knife raised. The blade was flint, turns out.

Worst part was, Graham blinked and looked right at me and I saw his skinned hand twitch. How he could be alive in that condition was no more or less fantastical than anything else, I suppose. Even so, even so. I still get a sick feeling in my stomach when I recall that image.

Apparently, the gods of the north had seen enough. Wind roared around us and everything went white and I was alone. Hurricane-force gusts knocked me off my feet and I barely managed to crawl to the team, almost missed them, in fact. Visibility was maybe six feet. Easily, easily could've kept going into the featureless maelstrom until I found the lip at the edge of a bottomless gulf of open water and joined Graham, wherever he'd gone.

That storm pinned the dogs and me to Norton Sound for three days. Gusts of seventy knots. Wind chill in excess of negative one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. You wouldn't understand how cold that is. I can't describe it. It's like trying to explain how far away Alpha Centauri is from Earth in highway miles. The brain isn't equipped. Froze my right hand and foot. Froze my face so that it hardened into a black and blue mask. Froze my dick. Didn't lose anything important, but man, there are few agonies equal to thawing a frostbitten extremity.

I actually managed to cripple across the finish line. Suffering through the aftermath of physical therapy and counseling, the memory of what I'd seen out there was wiped clean from my mind with the efficacy of a kid tipping an Etch A Sketch and giving it a shake. Seven or eight years passed before the horrible event came back to haunt me, and by then it was too late to say anything, too late to be certain whether it had happened or if I'd gone round the bend.

Snow drifted both lanes and the wind buffeted the Chevy, and goddamn, but I was reliving that blizzard of '92. The fuel gauge needle fell into the red and I drove another half an hour, creeping along in four-wheel hi. Radio reception was poor and I'd settled for a static-filled broadcast of '80s rock.

Hall & Oates, The Police, a block of Sade and Blue Oyster Cult, all that music our parents hated when we were bopping along in mullets.

"Godzilla" cut in and out during the drum solo, and a distorted animal growl that had nothing to do with heavy metal issued from the speakers. My name snarled over and over to the metronome of the wipers.

A truck stop glittered on the horizon of the next off ramp. Exhausted, frazzled, pissed, and afraid, I pulled alongside the pumps and got fuel. Then I hooked Minerva to a leash and brought her inside with me. She curled at my boots while I drank a quart of awful coffee and ate a New York steak with all the trimmings. The waitress didn't say anything about my bringing a pit bull to the table. Maybe the folks in Dakota were hip to that sort of thing. Didn't matter; I'd gotten the little card that proved Minerva was a service dog and of vital importance should I experience an "episode" of depression or mania.

Depression had haunted me since my retirement from mushing, and a friend who worked as counselor at the University of Anchorage suggested that I adopt a shelter puppy and train it as a companion animal. The local police had busted a dog-fighting ring and one of the females was pregnant, so Sharon and I eventually picked Minerva from a litter of eleven. A decade later, after my world burned to the ground—career in ashes, wife gone, friends few and far between—Minerva remained steadfast. A man and his dog versus the Outer Dark.

I patted her head as we went through the door, and wished that I possessed more of her canine equanimity in the face of the unknown.

The diner was doing brisk trade. Two burly truckers in company jumpsuits occupied the next booth, but most of the customers were gathered at the counter so they could watch weather reports on TV. Nothing heartening in the reports, either. The storm would definitely delay me by half a day, possibly more. My ardent hope was that I could just bull through it and be in the clear by the time I crossed Wyoming tomorrow. I also prayed that the pickup would hang together all the way to Lamprey Isle, New York, my destination at the end of the yellow brick road. My plan was to reach the home of an old friend, the eminent crime novelist, Jack Fort. Jack also happened to be a retired English professor. Jack claimed he could help. I

had my doubts. The pack and its leader were eternal and relentless. A man could plunk a few, sure. In the end, though, they simply reformed and kept pursuing. The Devil's smoke demons on the hunt.

Be that as it may, I'd decided to go down swinging, and that meant a hell-bent for leather ride into the east. Currently, my worries centered on weather and equipment. The drive from Alaska via the Alcan Highway had been rough, and I suspected the old engine was fixing to give up the ghost. I could say the same thing about my heart, my sanity, my luck.

Sure enough. Minerva snarled and bolted from her spot under the table. She crouched beside me, shivering. Foam dribbled from her jaw and her eyes bulged.

Graham strolled in, taller and happier than I remembered. Death agreed with some people. He loomed in Technicolor while reality bleached around him. His long black hair was feathered with snowflakes, and the lights hit it just right so he appeared angelic, a movie star pausing for his dramatic close-up. In his right hand, he carried the ivory hunting horn (indeed a ram's horn, albeit much more modest than its report); in his left he carried a faded cowboy hat with a crimson and black patch on the crown. He wore the Huntsman's iceberg-white mackinaw, ceremonial flint knife tucked into his belt so the bone handle jutted in a most phallic statement. He ambled over and slid in across from me. I noticed his sealskin boots left maroon smears on the tiles. I also noticed puffs of steam escaping our mouths as the booth cooled like a meat locker.

I cocked the .357 and braced it across my thigh. "You must not be heralding the great zombie invasion. Lookin' great, Steve. Not chalk white or anything. The rot must be on the inside."

He flipped his hair and smirked. His trophy necklace of wedding rings, key fobs, dog tags, driver licenses, and glass eyes clinked and rattled. "Likewise, amigo. You've lost weight? Dyed your hair? What?"

"This and that—diet, exercise. Fleeing in terror has the bonus effect of getting a man in shape. Divorce, too. My wife used to fatten me up pretty good. Since she split… you know. TV dinners and Johnnie Walker. I got it going on, huh?" I gripped Minerva's collar with my free hand. Her growls were deep and ferocious. She strained to lunge over the table, an eighty

pound bowling bowl; rippling muscle and bone crushing jaws and, at the moment, bad intentions. My arm was tired already. Tempting to let my girl fly, but I loved her.

"I'm yanking your chain. You look like crap. When's the last time you slept? There's a motel a piece up the trail. Why not get room service, watch a porno, drink some booze and fall into peaceful slumber? You won't even notice when I slip in there and slice your fucking throat ear to ear." Graham's smile widened. It was still him, too. Same guy I'd gotten drunk with at Nome saloons. Same perfect teeth, same easy manner, probably sincere. He'd not intimated any malice regarding his intent to skin me alive and eat my beating heart. This was business, mostly. He inclined his head slightly, as if intercepting my thought. "Not so much business as tradition. The Hunt is a sacred rite. I gave you the head start as a courtesy."

He was telling the truth as I understood it from my research of the legends. To witness the Hunt, to interfere with the Hunt, was to become prey. I'd wondered why the emissaries of the Horned One waited so long to come after me, especially considering the magnitude of my transgression. "Well, I reckon that was sporting of you. Twenty years. Plenty of time for Odysseus to screw his way home from the front."

"Yep, and you're almost there, too," Graham said. "Crazy ass scene on the ice, huh? Sergio Leone meets John Landis and they do it up right with razors. Man, you were totally Eastwood, six-gun blazing. Wounded the Huntsman in a serious way. Didn't kill the fucker, though. Don't flatter yourself on that score. Might be able to smoke the hounds with regular bullets. That shit don't work so well on the Huntsman. We're of a higher order. Nah, when that storm hit, some sort of force went through me, electrified me. I tore free of that altar and jumped on the bastard's back, stuck a hunting knife into his kidney. Still wouldn't have worked except the forces of darkness were smiling on me. Grooved on my style. The Boss demoted him, awarded me the mantle and the blade, the hounds, more bitches in Hell than you can shake a stick at. I've watched you for a while, bro. Watched you lose your woman, your career, your health. You're an old, grizzled bull. No money, no family, no friends, no future. It's culling time, baby."

"Shit, you're doing me a favor! Thanks, pal!"

“Come on, don’t be sarcastic. We’re still buds. This is going to be super-duper painful, but no reason to make it personal. Your hide will be but one more tossed atop a mountainous pile beside a chthonic lagoon of blood and the Horned One’s bone throne. The muster roll of the damned is endless, and the next name awaits my attentions.”

“Okay, nothing personal. Here’s the deal, since I’m the one with the hand cannon. You hold still and I’ll blow your head off. Take my chances with whomever they send next. No hard feelings.” I debated whether to shoot him under the table or risk raising the gun to aim properly.

Graham laughed. “Whoa, chief. This isn’t the place. All these hapless customers, the dishwasher, the waitress, the fry cooks. That sexy waitress. If we turn this into the O-K Corral, the Boss himself will be on the case. The Horned One isn’t a kindly soul. He comes around, everybody gets it in the neck. Them’s the rules, I’m afraid.”

A vision splashed across the home cinema of my imagination: every person in the diner strung from the rafters by their living guts, the hounds using the corpses for piñatas and the massive, shadowy bulk of the Horned God flickering fire in the parking lot as he gazed on in infernal joy. Like as not this image was projected by Graham. I glanced out the window and spotted one of the pack, a cadaverous brute in a threadbare parka and snow pants, pissing against the wheel of a semi. In another life he’d been Bukowski or Waits, or a serial killer who rode the rails and shanked fellow hobos, a strangler of coeds, a postman. I knew him for a split second, then not. Other hounds leaped from trailer to trailer, frolicking. Too dark to make out details, except that the figures flitted and fluttered with the lithe, rubbery grace of acrobats.

I said, “Tell me, Steve. What would’ve happened to you if I hadn’t interrupted the party? Where would you be tonight?”

He shrugged and his movie star teeth dulled to a shade of rotten ivory. “Ah, those are the sort of questions I try to let lie. The Boss frowns on us worrying about stuff above our pay grade.”

“Would you have become a hound?”

“Sometimes a damned soul gets dragged over to join the Hunt. Only the few, the proud. It’s a rare honor.”

Cold clamped on the back of my neck. “And the rest of the slobs who get taken? Where do they go after you’re done with them?”

“Not a clue, amigo. Truly an ineffable mystery.” His grin brightened again, so white, so frigid. He put on the cowboy hat. The logo was a red patch with a set of black antlers stitched in the foreground. Sign of the Horned God who was Graham’s master on the Other Side.

Minerva’s snarls and growls escalated to full-throated barks as she bristled and lunged. She’d had her fill of Mr. Death and his shark smirk. One of the truckers set down his coffee cup, pointed a thick finger at me, and said, “Hey, asshole. Shut that dog up.”

Graham’s eyes went dark, monitors tuned to deep space. A stain formed on the breast of his lily-white mackinaw. Blood dripped from his sleeve and the stink of carrion wafted from his mouth. He rose and turned and his shoulders seemed to broaden. I caught his profile reflected in the window and something was wrong with it, although I couldn’t tell what exactly. He said in a distorted, buzzing voice, “No, you shut your mouth. Or I’ll eat your tongue like a piece of Teriyaki.”

The trucker paled and scrambled from his seat and fled the diner without a word. His buddy followed suit. They didn’t grab their coats or pay the tab or anything. Other folks had twisted in their seats to view the commotion. None of them spoke, either. The waitress stood with her ticket book outthrust like a crucifix.

Graham said to them, “Hush, folks. Nothing to see here.” And everyone took the hint and went back to his or her business. He nodded and faced me, smile affixed, eyes sort of normal again. “I better get along, li’l doggie. Wanted to say hi. So hi and goodbye. Gonna keep trucking east? Wait, forget I asked. Don’t want to spoil the fun. See you soon, wherever that is.” Yeah, he grinned, but the wintry night was a heap warmer.

“Wait,” I said. “You mentioned rules. Be nice to know what they are.”

“Sure, there are lots of rules. However, you only need to worry about one of them: run, motherfucker.”

I never fully recovered from the incident in ’92; not down deep, not in the way that counts. Nightmares plagued me. Oblique, horror-show recreations as seen through the obfuscating mist of a subconscious in denial. Neither me nor the shrink could make sense of them. He put me on pills and that didn’t help.

I sold the team to a Japanese millionaire and moved to the suburbs of Anchorage with Sharon, took a series of crummy labor jobs, and worked on the Great American horror novel in the evenings. She finished grad school and landed a position teaching elementary grade art. Ever fascinated with pulp classics, when the novel appeared to be a dead end I tried my hand at genre short fiction and immediately landed a few sales. By the early aughts I was doing well enough to justify quitting the construction gig and staying home to work on stories full-time.

These were supernatural horror stories, fueled by the nightmares I didn’t understand, until it all came crashing in on me one afternoon during a game of winter golf with some buddies down at the beach. I keeled over on the frozen sand and was momentarily transported back to Norton Sound while my friends stood around wringing their hands. Normal folks don’t know what to do around a lunatic writhing on the ground and babbling in tongues.

A week on the couch wrapped in an electric blanket and shaking with terror followed. I didn’t level with anyone—not the shrink, not Sharon or my parents, not my friends or writer colleagues. I read a piece on the Wild Hunt in an article concerning world mythology and it was like getting socked in the belly. I finally knew what had happened, if not why. All that was left was to brood.

Life went on. We tried for children without success. I have a hunch Sharon left me because I was shooting blanks. Who the fuck knows, though. Much like the Wild Hunt, the Meaning of Life, and where matching socks vanish to, her motives remain a mystery. Things seemed cozy between us; she’d always been sympathetic to my tics and twitches, and I’d tried to be a good and loving husband in return. Obviously, living with a half-crazed author took a greater toll than I’d estimated. Add screams in the night and generally paranoid behavior to the equation…

One day she came home early, packed her bags, and headed for Italy with a music teacher from her school. Not a single tear in her eye when she said adios to me, either. That was the same week my longtime agent, a lewd, crude alcoholic expat Brit named Stanley Jones, was indicted on numerous federal charges including embezzlement, wire fraud, and illegal alien residence. He and his lover, the obscure English horror writer Samson Marks, absconded to Mexico with my life savings, as well as the nest eggs of several other authors. The scandal made all the industry trade rags, but the cops didn't seem overly concerned with chasing the duo.

I depended on those royalty checks as my physical condition was deteriorating. Cold weather made my bones ache. Some mornings my lumbar seized and it took twenty minutes to crawl out of bed. I hung on for a couple of years, but my situation declined. The publishing climate wasn't friendly with the recession and such. Foreclosure notices soon arrived in the mailbox.

Then, last week, Graham reappeared to put my misery into perspective.

Prior to this latter event, Jack Fort theorized that Sharon didn't run off to Italy because she was dissatisfied with the way things were going at home. Nor was it a coincidence that Jones robbed me blind and left me in the poorhouse. (Jack also employed the crook as an agent, and from what I gathered, the loss of funds contributed to his own divorce.) My friend became convinced dark forces had aligned against me in matters great and small.

Later, I told him about the Hunt and what I'd seen on the ice in 1992, how that particular chicken had come home to roost. He wasn't the least bit surprised. Unflappable Jack Fort; the original drink-boiling-water-and-piss-ice-cubes guy.

The night I called him we were both drunk, and when I spilled the story of how Graham had returned from the grave and wanted to mount my head on a trophy room wall in hell, instead of expressing bewilderment or fear for my sanity, Jack just said, "Right. I figured it was something like this. From grad school onward, Graham was headed for trouble, pure and simple. He was asshole buddies with exactly the wrong type of people. Occultism is nothing to fuck with. Anyway, you're sure it's the Wild Hunt?"

“Graham referred to himself as the Huntsman. So. It happened almost exactly like the legends.” Granted, there were variations on the theme. Each culture has its peculiarities and so focuses on different aspects. Some versions of the Hunt mythology have Odin calling the tune. Under Odin’s yoke, the Hunt is an expression of exuberance and feral joy, a celebration of the primal. Odin’s pack travels a couple of feet off the ground. Any fool that stands in the way gets mowed like grass. See Odin coming, you grab dirt and pray the spectral procession passes overhead and keeps moving on the trail of its quarry.

The gang from Alaska seemed darker, crueler, dirtier than the storybook versions; Graham and his troops reeked of sadism and madness. That eldritch psychosis leached from them into me, gathered in effluvial dankness in the back of my throat, lay on my tongue as a foul taint. The important details were plenty consistent—slavering hounds, feral Huntsman, a horned deity overseeing the chase, death and damnation to the prey.

Jack asked what happened and I gave him the scoop: “I was hiking along Hatcher Pass to photograph the mountain for research. Heard a god-awful racket in a nearby canyon. Howling, psycho laughter, screams. Some kind of Viking horn. I knew what was happening before I saw the pack on the summit. Knew it in my bones—the legends vary, of course. Still, the basics are damned clear whether it’s the Norwegians, Germans, or Inuit. The pack wasn’t in full chase mode or that would’ve been curtains. They wanted to scare me; makes the kill sweeter. Anyway, I beat feet. Made it to the truck and burned rubber. Graham showed up at the house later in a greasy puff of smoke, chatted with me through the door. He said I had three days to get my shit in order and then he and his boys would be after me for real.”

Jack remained quiet for a bit, except to cough a horrible, phlegmy cough—it sounded wet and entrenched as bronchitis or pneumonia. Finally he said, “Well, head east. I might be able to help you. Graham and me knew each other pretty well once upon a time when he was still teaching, and I got some ideas what he was up to after he left Boulder. He was an adventurer, but I doubt he spent all that time in the frozen north for the thrill. Nah, my bet is he was searching for the Hunt and it found him first. Poor silly bastard.”

“Thanks, man. Although, I hate to bring this to your doorstep. Interfere in the Hunt and it’s you on the skinning board next.”

“Shut up, kid. Tend your knitting and I’ll see to mine.”

Big Jack Fort’s nonchalant reaction should’ve startled me, and under different circumstances I might’ve pondered how deep the tentacles of this particular conspiracy went. His advice appealed, though. Sure, the Huntsman wanted me to take to my heels; the chase gave him a boner. Nonetheless, I’d rather present a moving target than hang around the empty house waiting to get snuffed on the toilet or in my sleep. Graham’s flayed body glistening in the arctic twilight was branded into my psyche.

“You better step lively,” Jack warned me, in that gravelly voice of his that always sounded the same whether sober or stewed. A big dude, built square, the offspring of Raymond Burr and a grand piano. Likely he was sprawled across his couch in a tee shirt and boxers, bottle of Maker’s Mark in one paw. “Got complications on my end. Can’t talk about them right now. Just haul ass and get here.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, nor the sound of his coughing. Despite a weakness for booze, Jack was one of the more stable guys in the business. However, he was a bit older than me and playing the role of estranged husband. Then there was the crap with Jones and dwindling book sales in general. I thought maybe he was cracking. I thought maybe we were both cracking.

Later that night I loaded the truck with a few essentials, including my wedding album and a handful of paperbacks I’d acquired at various literary conventions, locked the house, and lit out.

In the rearview mirror I saw Graham and three of his hounds as silhouettes on the garage roof, pinprick eyes blazing red as I drove away. It was, as the kids say, game on.

Rocketing through Indiana, “Slippery People” on the radio, darkness all around, darkness inside. The radio crackled and static erased the Talking Heads and Graham said to me, “Everybody on the lam from the Hunt feels

sorry for himself. Thing of it is, amigo, you're tuned to the wrong tune. You should ask yourself, How did I get here? What have I done?"

The pack raced alongside the truck. Hounds and master shimmered like starlight against the velvet backdrop, twisted like funnels of smoke. The Huntsman blew me a kiss and I tromped the accelerator and they fell off the pace. One of the hounds leaped the embankment rail and loped after me, snout pressed to the centerline. It darted into the shadows an instant before being overtaken and smooshed by a tractor trailer.

I pushed beyond exhaustion and well into the realm of zombification. The highway was a wormhole between dimensions and Graham occasionally whispered to me through the radio even though I'd hit the kill switch. And what he'd said really worked on me. What had I done to come to this pass? Maybe Sharon left me because I was a sonofabitch. Maybe Jones screwing me over was karma. The Wild Hunt might be a case of the universe getting Even-Steven (pardon the pun) with me. Thank the gods I didn't have a bottle of liquor handy or else I'd have spent the remainder of the long night totally blitzed and sobbing like a baby over misdeeds real and imagined. Instead, I popped the cap on a bottle of NoDoz and put the hammer down.

I parked and slept once in a turnout for a couple of hours during the middle of the day when traffic ran thickest. I risked no more than that. The Hunt had its rules regarding the taking of prey in front of too many witnesses, but I didn't have the balls to challenge those traditions.

The Chevy died outside Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Every gauge went crazy and plumes of steam boiled from the radiator. I got the rig towed to a salvage yard and transferred Minerva and my meager belongings to a compact rental. We were back on the road before breakfast, and late afternoon saw us aboard the ferry from Port Sanger, New York, to Lamprey Isle.

What to say about LI West (as Jack referred to it)? Nineteen miles north to south and about half that at its widest, the whole curved into a malformed crescent, the Man in the Moon's visage peeled from Luna and partially submerged in the Atlantic. Its rocky shore was sculpted by the clash of wind

and sea; a forest of pine, maple, and oak spanned the interior. Home of hoot owls and red squirrels; good deer hunting along the secret winding trails, I'd heard. Native burial mounds and mysterious megaliths, I'd also heard.

The main population center, Lamprey Township (pop. 2201), nestled in a cove on the southwestern tip of the island. Jack had mentioned that the town had been established as a fishing village in the early nineteenth century; prior to that, smugglers and slavers made it their refuge from privateers and local authorities. A den of illicit gambling and sodomy, I'd heard. Allegedly, the name arose from a vicious species of eels that infested the local waters. Long as a man's arm, the locals claimed.

Lamprey Township was a fog-shrouded settlement hemmed by the cove and spearhead shoals, a picket of evergreens. A gloomy cathedral fortress reared atop a cliff streaked with seagull shit and pocked by cave entrances. Lovers Leap. In town, everybody wore flannel and rain slickers, boots and sock caps. A folding knife and mackinaw crowd. Everything was covered in salt rime, everything tasted of brine. Piloting the rental down Main Street between boardwalks, compartment of the car flushed with soft blue-red lights reflecting from the ocean, I thought this wouldn't be such a bad place to die. Release my essential salts back into the primordial cradle.

Jack's cabin lay inland at the far end of a dirt spur. Built in the same era as the founding of Lamprey Township, he'd bought it from Katarina Veniti, a paranormal romance author who'd become jaded with all of the tourists and yuppies moving onto "her" island during the last recession. A stone and timber longhouse with ye old-fashioned shingles and moss on the roof surrounded by an acre of sloping yard overgrown with tall, dead grass. An oak had uprooted during a recent windstorm and toppled across the drive.

Minerva and I hoofed it the last quarter of a mile. The faceless moon dripped and shone through scudding clouds and a vault of branches. The house sat in darkness except for a light shining from the kitchen window.

"Welcome to Kat's island," Jack said, and coughed. He reclined in the shadows on a porch swing. Moonlight glinted from the bottle in his hand, the barrel of the pump-action shotgun across his knees. He wore a wool coat, dock-worker's cap snug over his brow, wool pants, and lace-up hiking

boots. When he stood to shake my hand, I realized his clothes hung loose as sails, that he was frail and shaky.

"Jesus, man," I said, shaken at the sight of him. He appeared more of an apparition than the bona fide spirit pursuing me. I understood why he didn't mind the idea of the Hunt invading his happy home. The man was so emaciated he should've been hanging near the blackboard in science class; a hundred pounds lighter since I'd last seen him, easy. He'd shaved his head and beard to gray stubble; his pallid flesh was dry and hot, his eyes sparkled like bits of quartz. He stank of gun oil, smoke, and rotting fruit.

"Yeah. The big C. Doc hit me with the bad news this spring. Deathwatch around the Fort. I sent the pets to live with my sister." He smiled and gestured at the woods. "Just you, me, and the trees. I got nothing better to do than help an old pal in his hour of need." He led the way inside. The kitchen was cheerily lighted, and we took residence at the dining table where he poured me a glass of whiskey and listened to my recap of the trip from Alaska.

"I hope you've got a plan," I said.

"Besides blasting them with grandma's twelve gauge?" He patted the stock of his shotgun where it lay on the table. "We're going out like a pair of Vikings."

"I'd be more excited if you had a flamethrower, or some grenades."

"Me too. Me too. I got a few sticks of dynamite for fishing and plenty of ammo."

"Dynamite is good. This is going to be full on Hollywood. Fast cars, shirtless women, explosions…"

"Man, I don't even know if it'll detonate. The shit's been stashed in a leaky box in the cellar for a hundred years. Honestly, my estimation is, we're hosed. Totally up shit creek. Our sole advantage is prey doesn't usually fight back. Graham's powerful, he's a spirit, or a monster, whatever. But he's new on the job, right? That may be our ray of sunshine. That, and according to the literature, the Pack doesn't fancy crossing large bodies of open water. These haunts prefer ice and snow." Jack coughed into a handkerchief. Belly-ripping, Doc Holliday kind of coughing. He wiped his mouth and had a belt of whiskey. His cheeks were blotched. "Anyway, I

brought you here for another reason. This house belonged to a sorcerer once upon a time. Type they used to burn at the stake. An unsavory guy named Ewers Welloc. The Wellocs own most of this island and there's a hell of a story in that. For now, let me say Ewers was blackest in a family of black sheep. The villagers were scared shitless of him, were convinced he practiced necromancy and other dark arts on the property. Considering the stories Kat told me and some of the funky stuff I've found stashed around here, it's hard to dismiss the villagers claims as superstition."

I could only wonder what he'd unearthed, or Kat before him. Jack bought the place for a dollar and suddenly that factoid assumed ominous significance. "What were you guys up to? You, Kat, and Graham attended college together. Did you form a club?"

"A witch coven. I kid, I kid. Wasn't college… We met at the Sugar Tree Hill writers' retreat. Five days of sun, fun, booze, and hand jobs. There were quite a few young authors there who went on to become quasi-prominent. Many a friendship and enmity are formed at Sugar Tree Hill. The three of us really clicked. Me and Kat were wild, man, wild. Nothing on Graham's scale, though. He took it way farther. As you can see."

"Yeah." I sipped my drink.

"Me and Graham were pretty tight until he schlepped to Alaska and started in with the sled dogs. Communication tapered off and after a while we fell out of touch. I received a few letters. Guy had the world's shittiest penmanship; would've taken a cryptologist to have deciphered them. I thought he suffered from cabin fever."

"Seemed okay to me," I said. "Gregarious. Popular. Handsome. He was well-regarded."

"Yeah, yeah… The rot was on the inside," Jack said and I almost spilled my glass. He didn't notice. "As it happens, my hole card is an ace. Lamprey Isle was settled long before the whites landed. Maybe before the Mohawk, Mohican, Seneca. Nobody knows who these people were, but none of the records are flattering. This mystery tribe left megaliths and cairns on islands and along the coast. A few of those megaliths are in the woods around here. Legend has it that the tribe erected them for use in necromantic rituals. Summon, bind, banish. Like Robert Howard hypothesized in his Conan

tales—if the demonic manifests on the mortal plane, it becomes subject to the laws of physics, and cold Hyperborean steel. Howard was onto something."

"Fairy rocks, huh?" I said. The whiskey was hitting me.

"Got any problem believing in the Grim Reaper with a hunting knife and a pack of werewolves chasing you from one end of the continent to the other?"

I tried again. "So. Fairy rocks."

"Fuckin' A, boy-o. Fairy rocks. And double aught buckshot."

We took shifts at watch until dawn. The Hunt didn't arrive and so passed a peaceful evening. I slept for three hours; the most I'd had in a week. Jack fried bacon and eggs for breakfast and we drank a pot of black coffee. Afterward he gave me a tour of the house and the immediate grounds. Much of the house gathered dust, exuding the vibe particular to dwellings of bachelors and widowers. Since his wife flew the coop, Jack's remit had contracted to kitchen, bath, living room. Too close to a tomb for my liking.

Tromping around the property with our breath streaming slantwise, he showed me a megalith hidden in the underbrush between a pair of sugar maples. Huge and misshapen beneath layers of slime and moss, the stone cast a shadow over us. It radiated the chill of an ice block. One of several in the vicinity, I soon learned.

Jack wasn't eager to hang around it. "There were lots of animal bones piled in the bushes. You'll never catch any animals living here. Wasn't the two decks of Camels I smoked every day since junior high that gave me cancer. It's these damned things. Near as I can figure, they're siphons. Let's pray the effect is magnified upon extra-dimensional beings. Otherwise, Graham will just eat our bullets and spit them back at us."

The megalith frightened me. I imagined it as a huge, predatory insect disguised as a stone, its ethereal rostrum stabbing an artery and sucking my life essence. I wondered if the stones were indigenous, or if the ancient tribes had fashioned them somehow. I'd never know. "Graham's an occultist. Think he's dumb enough to walk into a trap?"

“Graham ain’t Graham anymore. He’s the Huntsman.” Jack scanned the red-gold horizon and muttered dire predictions of another storm front descending from the west. “Trouble headed this way,” he said and hustled me back to the house. We locked and shuttered everything and took positions in the living room; Jack with his shotgun, me with my pistol and dog. Seated on the leather Italian sofa, bolstered by a pitcher of vodka and lemonade, we watched ancient episodes of The Rockford Files and Ironside and waited.

Several minutes past two p.m., the air dimmed to velvety purple and the trees behind the house thrashed and rain spattered the windows. The power died. I whistled a few bars of the Twilight Zone theme, shifted the pistol into my shooting hand.

Jack grinned and went to the window and stood there, a blue shadow limned in black. The booze in my tumbler quivered and the horn bellowed, right on top of us. Glass exploded and I was bleeding from the head and both hands that I’d raised to protect my face. Wood splintered and doors caved in all over the house and the hounds rolled into the living room; long, sinuous figures of pure malevolence with ruby-bright eyes, low to the floor and moving fast, teeth, tongues, appetite. I squinted and fired twice from the hip, and a bounding figure jerked short. Minerva pounced, snarling and tearing in frenzy, doggy mind reverting to the swamps and jungles and caves of her ancestors. Jack’s shotgun blazed a stroke of yellow flame and sheared the arm of a fiend who’d scuttled in close. Partially deafened and blinded, I couldn’t keep track of much after that. Squeezed the trigger four more times, popped the speed loader with six fresh slugs, kept firing at shadows that leaped and sprang. The Riders of the Apocalypse and Friends galloped through the house—our own private Armageddon. More glass whirled, and bits of wood and shreds of drapery; a section of ceiling collapsed in a cascade of sparks and rapidly blooming white carnations of drywall dust. Now the gods could watch.

Thunder of gunshots, Minerva growling, the damned, yodeling cries of the hounds, and crackling bones, wound around my brain in a knotted spool. I got knocked down in the melee and watched Minerva swing past, lazily flying, paws limp, guts raveling behind her. I’d owned many dogs, but Minerva was my first and only pet, my dearest friend. She was a mewling

puppy once more, then inert bone and slack hide, and gone, gone, the last pinprick of my life snuffed.

Something was on fire. Oily black smoke seethed through a vertical impact crater where the far wall had stood. Moon, clouds, and smoke boiled there. A couple of fingers were missing from my left hand. Blood pulsed forth: a shiny, crimson bouquet thickening into a lump at the end of my wrist, a wax sculpture from the house of horrors, an object example of Medieval torture. It didn't hurt. Didn't feel like anything. My jacket had been sliced, and the flesh beneath it, so that my innards glistened in the cold air. That didn't hurt either. Instead, I was buoyed by a feral joy. This wouldn't take much longer by the looks of it. I pulled the jacket closed as best I could and began the laborious process of standing. Almost done, almost home.

Jack cursed through a mouthful of dirt. The Huntsman had entered the fray and caught his skull in one splayed hand. He sawed through Jack's throat with that jagged flint dagger hewn from Stone Age crystal. The Huntsman sawed with so much vigor that Jack's limbs flopped crazily, a crash test dummy at the moment of impact. Graham let Jack's carcass thump to the sodden carpet among the savaged bodies of the pack. He pointed at me, him playing the lead man of a rock band shouting out to his audience. Yeah, the gods were with us, and no doubt.

"So, we meet again." He chuckled and licked his lips and wiped the Satan knife against his gory mackinaw. He approached, shuffling like a seal through the smoldering gloom, lighted by an inner radiance that bathed him in a weird, pale glow as cold and alien as the Aurora Borealis. The death-light of Hades, presumably. His eyes were hidden by the brim of his hat, but his smile curved, joyless and cruel.

I made it to my feet and scrambled backward over the flaming wreckage of coffee tables and easy chairs, the upended couch, and into the hall. Blood came from me in ropes, in sheets. Graham followed, smiling, smiling. Doorframes buckled as his shoulders brushed them. He swiped the knife in a loose and easy diamond pattern. The knife hissed as it rehearsed my evisceration. I wasn't worried about that. I was long past worry. Thoughts of vengeance dominated.

“You killed my dog.” Blood bubbles plopped from my lips, and that’s never good. Another dose of ferocious, joyful melancholy spurred me onward. I pitched the empty revolver at his head, watched the gun glance aside and spin away. My tears froze to salt on my cheeks. Arctic ice groaned beneath my boots as the sea swelled, yearned toward the moon. The sea drained the warmth from me, taking back what it had given.

“You killed your dog, mon frère. You did for our buddy Jack, too. Bringing me and my boys here like this. Don’t beat yourself up. It’s a volunteer army, right?”

I turned away, sliding, overbalancing. My legs folded and I slumped before a fallen timber, its charred length licked by small flames. The blood from my ruined hand sizzled and spat. I rubbed my face against the floor, painting myself a war mask of gore and charcoal. By the time he’d crossed the gap between us and seized my hair to flip me onto my back, at the precise moment he sank the blade into my chest, the fuse on the glycerin-wet stick of dynamite was a nub disappearing into its burrow.

Graham’s exultant expression changed. “Well, I forgot Jack was a fisherman,” he said. That fucking knife kept traveling, the irresistible force, and I embraced it, and him.

The Eternal Footman clapped, once.

After an eon of vectoring through infinite night, the door to the tilt-a-whirl opened and I plummeted and hit the earth hard enough to raise dust. Mud instead. An angelic choir serenaded me from stage left, beyond a screen of tall trees and fog. Wagner as interpreted by Homer’s sirens. The voices rose and fell, sweetly demanding my blood, the heat of my bones. That sounded fine; I imagined the soft, red lips parted, imagined that they glowed as the Huntsman glowed, but as an expression of erotic passion rather than malice, and I longed to open a vein for them.

I came to, paralyzed. Pieces of me lay scattered across the backyard. Probably for the best that I couldn’t turn my neck to properly survey the damage.

Graham sprawled across from me, face-down in the wet leaves. Wisps of smoke curled from him. He shuddered violently and lifted his head. Bones and joints snapped into place again. The left eye shimmered with reflections of fire. The right eye was black. Neither were human.

He said, “Are you dead? Are you dead? Or are you playing possum? I think you’re mostly dead. It doesn’t matter. Hell is come as you are.” He shook himself and began to crawl in my direction, slithering with a horrible serpent-like elasticity.

Mostly dead must’ve meant 99.9 percent dead, because I couldn’t even blink, much less raise a hand to forestall his taking my skull for the mantle, my soul to the bad place. A red haze obscured my vision and the world receded. The sirens in the forest called again, louder yet. Graham hesitated, his glance drawn to the voices that came from many directions now and sang in many languages.

Jack staggered from the smoking ruins of the house. He appeared to have been dunked in a vat of blood. He held his shotgun in a death grip. “The bell tolls for you, Stevie,” he said and blew off Graham’s left leg. He racked the slide and blasted Graham’s right leg to smithereens below the kneecap. Graham screamed and whipped around and tried to hamstring his tormentor. Not quite fast enough. Jack proved agile for an old guy with a slit throat.

The siren choir screamed in pleasure. Blam! Blam! Graham’s hands went bye-bye. The next slug severed his spine, judging by the ragdoll effect. His body went limp and he screamed, and I’m sure he would’ve happily leaped on Jack and eaten him alive if Jack hadn’t already dismembered him with some fancy shotgun work. Jack said something I didn’t catch. Might’ve uttered a curse in a foreign tongue… then stuck the barrel under Graham’s chin and took his head off with the last round.

I cheered telepathically. Then I finished dying. The score as the curtains closed was lovely, lovely.

This time I emerged from eternal night to Minerva kissing my face. I was lying on my back in the kitchen. There was a hole in the ceiling and gray

daylight poured through along with steady trickles of water from busted pipes.

Jack slouched at the table, which was stacked with various odds and ends. His shoulders were wide and round as boulders and he'd gained back all the weight cancer had stolen. He clutched a bottle of Old Crow and watched me intently. He said, "Stay away from the light, kid. It's fire and lava."

I spat clotted blood. Finally, I said, "He's dead?"

"Again."

"Singing…" I managed.

"Oh, yeah. Don't listen. That's just the vampire stones. They're fat on Graham's energy."

"How'd I get in here?"

"I dragged you by your hair."

The world kept solidifying around me, and my senses along with it. Me, Minerva, and Jack being alive didn't compute. Except, as the cobwebs cleared from my mind, it made a sinister kind of sense. I laid my hand on Minerva's fur and noticed the red sparks in her eyes, how goddamned long and white her teeth were. "Oh, shit," I said.

"Yeah," Jack said. He set aside the bottle and shrugged into the Huntsman's impeccable snow white mackinaw. Perfect fit. Next came the Huntsman's hat. Different on Jack; broader and of a style I didn't recognize. The red and black crest was gone. Real antlers in its stead. A shadow crossed his expression and the light in the room gathered in his eyes. "Get up," he said.

And I did. Not a mark on me. I felt quite alive for a dead man. Hideous strength coursed through my limbs. I thought of my philandering ex-wife, her music teacher beau, and hideous thoughts coursed through my mind. I must've retained a tiny fragment of humanity because I managed to look away from that vista of terrible and splendorous vengeance. For the moment, at least. I said, "Where now?"

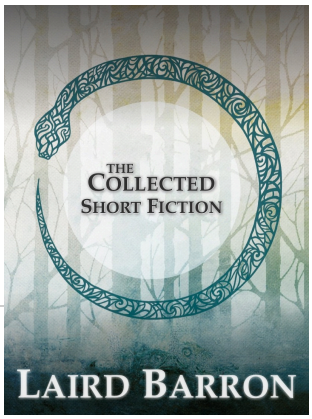
Jack leaned on a broad, barbed spear that had replaced his emptied shotgun. "There's this guy in Mexico I'd like to visit," he said. He handed me the flint knife and the herald's horn. "Do the honors, kid."

“Oh, Stanley. It’ll be good to see you again.” I pressed the horn to my lips and winded it, once. The kitchen wall disintegrated and the shockwave traveled swiftly, rippling grass and causing birds to lift in panic from the trees. I imagined Stanley Jones, somewhere far to the south, seated on his veranda, tequila at hand, American newspaper balanced on his rickety knee, ear cocked, straining to divine the origin of dim bellow carried by the wind.

Minerva bayed. She gathered her sleek, killing bulk and hurtled across the yard and into the woods.

I patted the hilt of the knife and followed her.

Frontier Death Song



This version taken from *Swift to Chase*, 2016
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Night descended on Interstate-90 as I crossed over into the Badlands. Real raw weather for October. Snow dusted the asphalt and picnic tables of the deserted rest area. The scene was virginal as death. I parked the Chevy under one of the lamp posts that burned at either end of the lot. A metal building with a canted roof sat low and sleek in the center island, most of its windows dark. Against the black backdrop it reminded me of a crypt or monument to travelers and pioneers lost down through the years. Placards were obscured by shadows and could've pronounced warnings or curses, could've said anything in any language. Reality was pliable tonight.

I loosed Minerva and watched her trot around the perimeter of the sodium glow. She raised her graying snout and growled softly at the void that surrounded us, poured from us. Her tracks and the infrequent firefly sparks on the road were the only signs of life for miles. Snow was falling thick and those small signs wouldn't last long. Periodically a semi chugged along the freeway, its running lights tiny and dim. Other than that, this was the Moon. It was back to the previous ice age for us, the end for us. I kind of, sort of, liked the idea that this might be the end, except for the fact sweet, loyal Minerva hadn't asked for any of it, and my nature, my atavistic shadow, was, as usual, a belligerent sonofabitch. My shadow exhibited the type of primitive stubbornness that causes men to weigh themselves with stones before they jump into the midnight blue, causes them to mix the pills with antifreeze, trade the pistol bullet to the brain for a shotgun barrel in the mouth, to be on the safe side. My shadow didn't give a shit about odds, or eventualities, or pain, or certain death. It wanted to keep shining.

So, Minerva pissed in the snow and I ticked off the seconds until the ultimate showdown.

My ear was killing me tonight, crackling like a busted radio speaker and ringing with good old tinnitus. The sensation was that of an auger boring through membrane and meat. My back and knee ached. I lost the ear to a virus upon contracting pneumonia in Alaska during a long ago Iditarod. The spine and knee got ruined after I fell off a cliff into the Bering Sea and broke almost everything that was breakable. Resilience was my gift and I'd recovered sufficiently to limp through the remainder of a wasted youth, to fake a hale and hearty demeanor. That shit was surely catching up now at the precipice of the miserable slide into middle age. All those forgotten or ignored wounds blooming in a chorus of ghostly pain, reminders of longstanding debts, reminders that a man can't always outrun provenance.

I checked my watch and the numbers blurred. I hadn't slept in way too long, else I never would've pulled over between Bumfuck, Egypt and Timbuktu. Since suicide by passivity was off the table, this was an expression of stubbornness on my part, probably. Grim defiance, or the need to reassert my faith in the logical operations of the universe if but for a moment.

What a joke, faith. What a sham, logic.

A hunting horn sounded far out there in the darkness beyond the humps and swales and treeless drumlin that went on basically forever, past the vast hungry prairies that had swallowed so many wagon trains.

Oh, yes. The horn of the Hunt bugling my death song.

Not simply a horn, but one that could easily be imagined as the hollowed relic from a giant, perverted ram with blood-specked foam lathering its muzzle and hellfire beaming from its eyes. A ram that crunched the bones of Saxons for breakfast and brandished a cock the girth of a wagon axle; the kind of brute that tribes sacrificed babies to when crops were bad and mated unfortunate maidens to when the chief needed some special juju on the eve of a war. Its horn was the sort of artifact that stood on end in a petrified coil and would require a brawny Viking raider to lift. Or a demon.

That wail stood my hair on end, slapped me wide awake. It rolled toward the parking lot, swelling like some medieval air raid klaxon. Snowflakes

weren’t melting on my cheeks because all the heat, all the blood, went rushing inward. That erstwhile faith in the natural universe, the rational order of reality, wouldn’t be troubling me again anytime soon. Nope.

I whistled for Minerva and she leaped into the truck, riding shotgun. Her hackles were bunched. She barked her fury and terror at the night. Sleep, O blessed sleep, how I longed for thee. No time for that. We had to get gone. The Devil would be there soon.

Years ago when I raced sled dogs for a living, I knew a fellow named Steven Graham, a disgraced lit professor from the University of Colorado. He’d gotten shitcanned for reasons opaque to my blue collar sensibilities—something to do with privileging contemporary zombie stories over the works of the Russian masters. His past was shrouded in mystery and like a lot people, he’d fled to Alaska to reinvent himself.

Nobody on the racing circuit cared much about any of that. Graham was charming and charismatic in spades. He drank and swore with the best of us, but he’d also get three sheets to the wind and recite a bit of *Beowulf* in Olde English and he knew the bloodlines of huskies from Balto onward. Strap a pair of snowshoes to that lanky greenhorn bastard and he’d leave even the most hardened back country trapper in the proverbial dust. All the girlies adored him, and so did the cameras. Like Cummings said, he was a hell of a handsome man.

Too good to be true.

Steven Graham got taken by the Hunt while he was running the ’92 Iditarod. That’s the big winter event where men and women hook a bunch of huskies to sleds and race twelve hundred miles across Alaska from Anchorage to Nome. There’s not much to say about it—it’s long and grueling and lonely. You’re always crossing a frozen swamp or mushing up an ice-jammed river or trudging over a mountain. It’s dark and cold and mostly devoid of sound or movement but for one’s own breath and the muted panting of the huskies, the jingle and clink of their traces.

Official records have it that Graham, young ex professor and dilettante adventurer, took a wrong turn out on Norton Sound between Koyuk and

Elim and went through the ice into the sea. *Ka-sploosh*. No trace of him or the dogs was found. The Lieutenant Governor attended the funeral. CNN covered it live.

The report was bullshit, of course; I saw what really happened. And because I saw what really happened, because I meddled in the Hunt, there would be hell to pay.

Broad daylight, maybe an hour prior to sunset, mid-March of ’92.

All twelve dogs in harness trotted along nicely. The end of the trail in Nome was about two days away. Things hadn’t gone particularly well and I was cruising for a middle of the pack finish and a long, destitute summer of begging corporate sponsors not to drop my underachieving ass. But damn, what a gorgeous day in the arctic with the snowpack curving around me to the horizon, the sky frozen between apple-green and steely blue, the orange ball of the sun dipping below the Earth. The effect was something out of *Fantasia*. After days of inadequate sleep, I was lulled by the hiss of the sled runners, the rhythmic scrape and slap of dog paws. I dozed at the handlebars and dreamed of Sharon, the warmth of our home, a cup of real coffee, a hot shower, and the down comforter on our bed.

When my team passed through a gap in a mile-long pressure ridge that had heaved the Bering ice to an eight-foot tall parapet, the Hunt had taken down Graham on the other side, maybe twenty yards off the main drag. This I discovered when one of Graham’s huskies loped toward me, free of its traces yet still in harness. The poor critter’s head had been lopped at mid-neck and it zig-zagged several strides and then collapsed in the trail. You’d think my own dogs would’ve spooked. Instead, an atavistic switch was tripped in their doggy brains and they surged forward, yapping and howling.

Several yards to my right so much blood covered the snow I thought I was hallucinating a sunset dripped onto the ice. The scene confused me for a few seconds as my brain locked down and spun in place. The killing ground was a fucking mess like there’d been a mass walrus slaughter committed on the spot. Dead huskies were flung about, intestines looped over berms and

piled in loose, steaming coils. Graham himself lay spread-eagle across a blue-white slab of ice repurposed as an impromptu sacrificial altar. He was split wide, eyes blank.

The Huntsman had most of the guy's hide off and was tacking it alongside the carcass as one stretches the skin of a beaver or a bear. Clad in a deerstalker hat surmounted by antlers, a blood-drenched mackinaw coat, canvas breeches, and sealskin boots, the Huntsman stood taller than most men even as he hunched to slice Graham with a large knife of flint or obsidian—I wasn't quite close enough to discern which.

Meanwhile, the Huntsman's wolf pack ranged among the butchered huskies. These wolves were black, and gaunt as cadavers; their narrow eyes glinted, reflecting the snow, the changeable heavens. When several of them reared on hind legs to study me, I decided they weren't wolves at all. Some wore olden leather and caps with splintered nubs of horn; others were garbed in the remnants of military fatigues and camouflage jackets of various styles, gore encrusted and ingrown to the creatures' hides. They grinned at me and their mouths were very, very wide.

Nothing brave in what I did, or at least tried to do. My befuddled intellect was still processing the carnage when I sank the hook and tethered the team, left them baying frantically in the middle of the trail. I wasn't thinking of a damned thing as I walked stiff-legged toward the Hunt and the in-progress evisceration of my comrade. Most mushers carried firearms on the trail. There were moose to contend with and frankly, a gun is pretty much basic equipment in any case. We toted rifles or pistols like folks in the Lower-48 carry cell phones and wallets. Mine was a .357 I stowed inside my anorak to keep the cylinder from freezing into a solid lump. The revolver was in my hand and it jumped twice and I don't recall the booms. No sound, only fire. The closest pair of dog men flipped over and a small part of my mind celebrated that at least the fuckers could be hurt, it wasn't like the legends or the movies; no silver required, lead worked fine.

The Huntsman whirled when I was nearly upon him, and Jesus help me I glimpsed his face. That's probably why my hair went white. I squeezed the trigger three more times, emptied the gun and even as the bullets smacked him, I had the sense of shooting into an abyss—absolute hopeless, soul-

draining futility. The Huntsman swayed, humungous knife raised. The blade was flint, by the way.

Worst part was, Graham blinked and looked right at me and I saw his skinned hand twitch. How he could be alive in that condition was no more or less fantastical than anything else, I suppose. Even so, even so. I still get a sick feeling in my stomach when I recall that image.

Apparently, the gods of the north had seen enough. Wind roared around us and everything went white and I was alone. Hurricane force gusts knocked me off my feet and I barely managed to crawl to the team, almost missed them, in fact. Visibility was maybe six feet. Easily, easily could've kept going into the featureless maelstrom until I found the lip at the edge of a bottomless gulf of open water and joined Graham, wherever he'd gone.

That storm pinned the dogs and me to Norton Sound for three days. Gusts of seventy knots. Wind chill in excess of negative one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. You wouldn't understand how cold that is. I can't describe it. It's like trying to explain how far away Alpha Centauri is from Earth in highway miles. The brain isn't equipped. Froze my right hand and foot. Froze my face so that it hardened into a black and blue mask. Froze my dick. Didn't lose anything important, but man, there are few agonies equal to thawing a frostbitten extremity.

I actually managed to cripple across the finish line. Suffering through the aftermath of physical therapy and counseling, the memory of what I'd seen out there was wiped clean from my mind with the efficacy of a kid tipping an Etch A Sketch and giving it a shake. Seven or eight years passed before the horrible event came back to haunt me and by then it was too late to say anything, too late to be certain whether it had happened or if I'd gone around the bend.

Snow drifted both lanes and the wind buffeted the Chevy, and goddamn, but I was reliving that blizzard of '92. The fuel gauge needle fell into the red and I drove another half hour, creeping along in four wheel hi. Radio reception was poor and I'd settled for a static-filled broadcast of '80s rock.

Hall & Oates, The Police, a block of Sade and Blue Oyster Cult, all that music our parents hated when we were bopping along in mullets.

"Godzilla" cut in and out during the drum solo and a distorted animal growl that had nothing to do with heavy metal issued from the speakers. My name snarled over and over to the metronome of the wipers.

A truck stop glittered on the horizon of the next off ramp. Exhausted, frazzled, pissed, and afraid, I pulled alongside the pumps and got fuel. Then I hooked Minerva to a leash and brought her inside with me. I patted her head as we went through the door, and wished that I possessed more of her canine equanimity in the face of the unknown.

She curled at my boots while I drank a quart of awful coffee and ate a New York steak with all the trimmings. The waitress didn't say anything about my bringing a pit bull to the table. Maybe the folks in Dakota were hip to that sort of thing. Didn't matter; I'd gotten the little card that proved Minerva was a service dog and of vital importance should I experience an "episode" of depression or mania.

Depression had haunted me since my retirement from mushing, and a friend who worked as counselor at the University of Anchorage suggested that I adopt a shelter puppy and train it as a companion animal. The local police had busted a dog fighting ring and one of the females was pregnant, so Sharon and I eventually picked Minerva from a litter of eleven. A decade later, after my world burned to the ground, career in ashes, wife gone, friends few and far between, Minerva remained steadfast. A man and his dog versus the Outer Dark.

The diner was doing brisk trade. Two burly truckers in company jumpsuits occupied the next booth, but most of the customers were gathered at the counter so they could watch weather reports on TV. Nothing heartening in the reports, either. The storm would definitely delay me by half a day, possibly more. My ardent hope was that I could bull through it and be in the clear by the time I crossed Minnesota tomorrow. I also prayed that the pickup would hang together all the way to Lamprey Isle, New York, my destination at the end of the yellow brick road. My plan was to reach the home of an old friend named Jack Fort, a retired English professor and fellow author. Jack claimed he could help. I had my doubts. The pack and

its leader were eternal and relentless. A man could plunk a few, sure. In the end, though, they simply reformed and kept pursuing. The Devil's smoke demons on the hunt.

Be that as it may, I'd decided to go down swinging and that meant a hell-bent for leather ride into the east. Currently, my worries centered on weather and equipment. The drive from Alaska via the Alcan Highway had been rough and I suspected the old engine was fixing to give up the ghost. I could say the same thing about my heart, my sanity, my luck.

Sure enough. Minerva snarled and bolted from her spot under the table. She crouched beside me, shivering. Foam dribbled from her jaw and her eyes bulged.

Graham strolled in, taller and happier than I remembered. Death agreed with some people. He loomed in Technicolor while reality bleached around him. His long black hair was feathered with snowflakes and the lights hit it at the right angle so he appeared angelic, a movie star pausing for his dramatic close-up. He lugged the ivory hunting horn (indeed a ram's horn, albeit much more modest than its report); in his left he carried a faded cowboy hat with a crimson and black patch on the crown. He wore the Huntsman's iceberg-white mackinaw, ceremonial flint knife tucked into his belt so the bone handle jutted in a most phallic statement. He ambled over and slid in across from me. I noticed his sealskin boots left maroon smears on the tiles. I also noticed puffs of steam escaping our mouths as the booth cooled like a meat locker.

I cocked the .357 and braced it across my thigh. "You must not be heralding the great zombie invasion. Lookin' great, Steve. Not chalk white or anything. The rot must be on the inside."

He flipped his hair in a Fabio imitation. His trophy necklace of wedding rings, key fobs, dog tags, driver licenses, and glass eyes clinked and rattled. "Likewise, amigo. You've lost weight? Dyed your hair? What?"

"This and that—diet, exercise. Fleeing in terror has the bonus effect of getting a man in shape. Divorce, too. My wife used to fatten me up pretty good. Since she split… You know. TV dinners and Johnnie Walker. I got it going on, huh?" I gripped Minerva's collar with my free hand. Her growls were deep and ferocious. She strained to lunge over the table, an eighty-

pound bowling bowl; rippling muscle and bone crushing jaws and, at the moment, bad intentions. My arm was tired already. Tempting to let my girl fly, but I loved her.

"I'm yanking your chain. You look like crap. When's the last time you slept? There's a motel a piece up the trail. Why not get room service, watch a porno, drink some booze and fall into peaceful slumber? You won't even notice when I slip in there and slice your fucking throat ear to ear." Graham's smile widened. It was still him, too. Same guy I'd gotten drunk with at Nome saloons. Same perfect teeth, same easy manner, probably sincere. He'd not intimated any malice regarding his intent to skin me alive and eat my beating heart. This was business, mostly. He inclined his head, as if intercepting my thought. "Not so much *business* as tradition. The Hunt is a sacred rite. I gave you the head start as a courtesy."

He was telling the truth as I understood it from my research of the legends. To witness the Hunt, to interfere with the Hunt, was to become prey. I'd wondered why the emissaries of the Horned One waited so long to come after me, especially considering the magnitude of my transgression. "Well, I reckon that was sporting of you. Twenty years. Plenty of time for Odysseus to screw his way home from the front."

"And you're almost there too," Graham said. "Crazy ass scene on the ice, huh? Sergio Leone meets John Landis and they do it up right with razors. Man, you were totally Eastwood, six-gun blazing. Wounded the Huntsman in a serious way. Didn't kill the fucker, though. Don't flatter yourself on that score. Might be able to smoke the hounds with regular bullets. That shit don't work so well on the Huntsman. We're of a higher order. Nah, when that storm hit, some sort of force went through me, electrified me. I tore free of the altar and jumped on the bastard's back, stuck a hunting knife into his kidney. Still wouldn't have worked except the forces of darkness were smiling on me. Grooved on my style. The Boss demoted him, awarded me the mantle and the blade, the hounds, and more bitches in Hell than you can shake a stick at. I've watched you for a while, bro. Watched you lose your woman, your career, your health. You're an old, grizzled bull. No money, no family, no friends, no future. It's culling time, baby."

"Shit, you're doing me a favor! Thanks, pal!"

“Come on, don’t be sarcastic. We’re still buds. This is going to be super-duper painful, but no reason to make it personal. Your hide will be but one more tossed atop a mountainous pile beside a chthonic lagoon of blood and the Horned One’s bone throne. The muster roll of the damned is endless and the next name awaits my attentions.”

“Okay, nothing personal. Here’s the deal since I’m the one with the hand cannon. You hold still and I’ll blow your head off. Take my chances with whomever they send next. No hard feelings.” I debated whether to shoot him under the table or risk raising the gun to aim properly.

Graham laughed. “Whoa, chief. This isn’t the place. All these hapless customers, the dishwasher, the fry cooks. That sexy waitress. If we turn this into the O-K Corral, the Boss himself will be on the case. The Horned One isn’t a kindly soul. He comes around, *everybody* gets it in the neck. Them’s the rules, I’m afraid.”

A vision splashed across the home cinema of my imagination: every person in the diner strung from the rafters by their living guts, the hounds using the corpses for piñatas and the massive, shadowy bulk of the Horned God flickering fire in the parking lot as he gazed on in infernal joy. Like as not this image was projected by Graham. I glanced out the window and spotted one of the pack, a cadaverous brute in a threadbare parka and snow pants, pissing against the wheel of a semi. In another life he’d been Bukowski or Waits, or a serial killer who rode the rails and shanked fellow hobos, a strangler of coeds, a postman. I knew him for a split second, then not. Other hounds leaped from trailer to trailer, frolicking. Too dark to make out details except that the figures flitted and fluttered with the lithe, rubbery grace of acrobats.

I said, “Tell me, Steve. What would’ve happened to you if I hadn’t interrupted the party? Where would you be tonight?”

He shrugged and his movie star teeth dulled to a shade of rotten ivory. “Ah, those are the sort of questions I try to let lie. The Boss frowns on us worrying about stuff above our pay grade.”

“Would you have become a hound?”

“Sometimes a damned soul gets dragged over to join the Hunt. Only the few, the proud. It’s a rare honor.”

Cold clamped on the back of my neck. “And the rest of the slobs who get taken? Where do they go after you’re done with them?”

“Not a clue, amigo. Truly an ineffable mystery.” His grin brightened again, so white, so frigid. He put on the cowboy hat. I could see it clear, now—the logo was a red patch with a set of black antlers stitched in the foreground. Sign of the Horned God who was Graham’s master on the Other Side.

Minerva’s snarls and growls escalated to full-throated barks as she bristled and lunged. She’d had her fill of Mr. Death and his shark smirk. One of the truckers set down his coffee cup, pointed a thick finger at me, and said, “Hey, asshole. Shut that dog up.”

Graham’s eyes went dark, monitors tuned to deep space. A stain formed on the breast of his lily-white mackinaw. Blood dripped from his sleeve and the stink of carrion wafted from his mouth. He rose and turned and his shoulders seemed to broaden. I caught his profile reflected in the window and something was wrong with it, although I couldn’t tell what exactly. He said in a distorted, buzzing voice, “*No, you shut* your*mouth. Or I’ll eat your tongue like a piece of Teriyaki.”*

The trucker paled and scrambled from his seat and fled the diner without a word. His buddy followed suit. They didn’t grab their coats or pay the tab, or anything. Other folks had twisted in their seats to view the commotion. None of them spoke either. The waitress stood with her ticket book outthrust like a crucifix.

Graham said to them, “Hush, folks. Nothing to see here.” And everyone took the hint and went back to his or her business. He nodded and faced me, smile affixed, eyes sort of normal again. “I better get along, li’l doggie. Wanted to say hi. So hi and goodbye. Gonna keep trucking east? Wait, forget I asked. Don’t want to spoil the fun. See you soon, wherever that is.” Yeah, he grinned, but the wintry night was a heap warmer.

“Wait,” I said. “You mentioned rules. Be nice to know what they are.”

“Sure, there are lots of rules. However, *you* only need to worry about one of them. Run, motherfucker.”

So, how did I wind up on the road with the hounds of hell on my trail?

I never fully recovered from the incident in ’92; not down deep, not in the way that counts. Nightmares plagued me. Oblique, horror-show recreations as seen through the obfuscating mist of a subconscious in denial. Neither I nor the shrink could make sense of them. He put me on pills and that didn’t help.

I sold the team to a Japanese millionaire and moved to the suburbs of Anchorage with Sharon, took a series of crummy labor jobs and worked on the Great American horror novel in the evenings. She finished grad school and landed a position teaching elementary grade art. Ever fascinated with pulp classics, when the novel appeared to be a dead end I tried my hand at genre short fiction and immediately landed a few sales. By the early Aughts I was doing well enough to justify quitting the construction gig and staying home to work on stories full-time.

These were supernatural horror stories, fueled by the nightmares I didn’t understand until it all came crashing in on me one afternoon during a game of winter golf with some buddies down at the beach. I keeled over on the frozen sand and was momentarily transported back to Norton Sound while my friends stood around wringing their hands. Normal folks don’t know what to do around a lunatic writhing on the ground and babbling in tongues.

A week on the couch wrapped in an electric blanket and shaking with terror followed. I didn’t level with anyone—not the shrink, not Sharon or my parents, not my friends or writer colleagues. I read a piece on the Wild Hunt in an article concerning world mythology and it was like getting socked in the belly. I finally knew what had happened, if not why. All that was left was to brood.

Life went on. We tried for children without success. I have a hunch Sharon left me because I was shooting blanks. Who the fuck knows, though. Much like the Wild Hunt, the Meaning of Life, and where matching socks vanish to, her motives remain a mystery. Things seemed cozy between us; she’d always been sympathetic of my tics and twitches and I’d tried to be a good and loving husband in return. Obviously, living with a half-crazed author took a greater toll than I’d estimated. Add screams in the night and generally paranoid behavior to the equation…

One day she came home early, packed her bags, and headed for Italy with a music teacher from her school. Not a single tear in her eye when she said adios to me, either. That was the same week my longtime agent, a lewd, crude alcoholic expat Brit editor named Stanley Jones, was indicted on numerous federal charges including embezzlement, wire fraud, and illegal alien residence. He and his lover, the obscure English horror writer Samson Marks, absconded to South America with my life savings, as well as the nest eggs of several other authors. The scandal made all the industry trade rags, but the cops didn't seem overly concerned with chasing the duo.

I depended on those royalty checks as my physical condition was deteriorating. Cold weather made my bones ache. Some mornings my lumbar seized and it took twenty minutes to crawl out of bed. I hung on for a couple of years, but my situation declined. The publishing climate wasn't friendly with the recession and such. Foreclosure notices soon arrived in the mailbox.

Then, last week, while I was out on a nature hike, after all these bloody years, Graham reappeared to put my misery into perspective. We'll get to that in a minute.

You see, prior to this latter event, my colleague, the eminent crime novelist Jack Fort, theorized that Sharon didn't run off to Italy because she was dissatisfied with the way things were going at home. Nor was it a coincidence that Jones robbed me blind and left me in the poorhouse (Jack also employed the crook as an agent and from what I gathered the loss of funds contributed to his own divorce). My friend became convinced dark forces had aligned against me in matters great and small. Figuring he might not dismiss me as a nutcase out of hand, I recounted my brush with the Hunt on the ice in '92, how that particular chicken had come home to roost. He wasn't the least bit surprised. Unflappable Jeffrey Fort; the original drink-boiling-water-and-piss-ice-cubes guy.

The other night when I called him we were both drunk. I spilled the story of how Graham had returned from the grave and wanted to mount my head on a trophy room wall in hell.

Instead of expressing bewilderment or fear for my sanity, Jack said, "Right. I figured it was something like this. From grad school onward, Graham was

headed for trouble, pure and simple. He was asshole buddies with exactly the wrong type of people. Occultism is nothing to fuck with. Anyway, you're sure it's the Wild Hunt?"

I gave him the scoop: "Last Wednesday, I was hiking along Hatcher Pass to photograph the mountain for research. Heard a god-awful racket in a nearby canyon. Howling, psycho laughter, screams. Some kind of Viking horn. I knew what was happening before I saw the pack on the summit. Knew it in my bones—the legends vary, of course. Still, the basics are damned clear whether it's the Norwegians, Germans, or Inuit. The pack wasn't in full chase mode or that would've been curtains. They wanted to scare me; makes the kill sweeter. Anyway, I beat feet. Made it to the truck and burned rubber. Graham showed up at the house later in a greasy puff of smoke, chatted with me through the door. He said I had three days to get my shit in order and then he and his boys would be after me for real. Referred to himself as the Huntsman. So. It happened almost exactly like the legends."

Yeah, I knew all about the legends. I'd done my due diligence; you can bet on that. Granted, there were variations on the theme. Each culture has its peculiarities and each focuses on different aspects. Some versions of the Hunt mythology have Odin calling the tune and the exercise is one of exuberance and feral joy, a celebration of the primal. Odin's pack travels a couple of feet off the ground. Any fool that stands in the way gets mowed like grass. See Odin coming, you grab dirt and pray the spectral procession passes overhead and keeps moving on the trail of its quarry.

The gang from Alaska seemed darker, crueler, dirtier than the storybook versions; Graham and his troops reeked of sadism and madness. That eldritch psychosis leached from them into me, gathered in effluvial dankness in the back of my throat, lay on my tongue as a foul taint. The important details were plenty consistent—slavering hounds, feral Huntsman, a horned deity overseeing the chase, death and damnation to the prey.

Jack remained quiet for a bit, except to cough a horrible phlegmy cough—it sounded wet and entrenched as bronchitis or pneumonia. Finally he said, "Well, head east. I might be able to help you. Graham and I knew each other pretty well once upon a time when he was still teaching and I got some ideas what he was up to after he left Boulder. He was an adventurer,

but I doubt he spent all that time in the frozen north for the thrill. Nah, my bet is he was searching for the Hunt and it found him first. Poor silly bastard."

"Thanks, man. Although, I hate to bring this to your doorstep. Interfere in the Hunt and it's you on the skinning board next."

"Shut up, kid. Tend your knitting and I'll see to mine."

Big Jack Fort's nonchalant reaction should've startled me, and under different circumstances I might've pondered how deep the tentacles of this particular conspiracy went. His advice appealed, though. Sure, the Huntsman wanted me to take to my heels; the chase gave him a boner. That said, I'd rather present a moving target than hang around the empty house waiting to get snuffed on the toilet or in my sleep. Graham's flayed body glistening in the arctic twilight was branded into my psyche.

"You better step lively," Jack warned me in that gravelly voice of his that always sounded the same whether sober or stewed. A big dude, built square, the offspring of Raymond Burr and a grand piano. Likely he was sprawled across his couch in a tee shirt and boxers, bottle of Maker's Mark in one paw. "Got complications on my end. Can't talk about them right now. Just haul ass and get here."

I didn't like the sound of that, nor the sound of his coughing. Despite a weakness for booze, Jack was one of the more stable guys in the business. However, he was a bit older than me and playing the role of estranged husband. Then there was the crap with Jones and dwindling book sales in general. I thought maybe he was cracking. I thought maybe we were *both* cracking.

Later that night I loaded the truck with a few essentials, including my wedding album and a handful of paperbacks I'd acquired at various literary conventions, locked the house, and lit out.

In the rearview mirror I saw Graham and three of his hounds as silhouettes on the garage roof, pinprick eyes blazing red as I drove away. It was, as the kids say, game on.

Rocketing through Indiana, “Slippery People” on the radio, darkness all around, darkness inside. The radio crackled and static erased the Talking Heads and Graham said to me, “Everybody on the lam from the Hunt feels sorry for himself. Thing of it is, amigo, you’re dialed to the wrong tune. You should ask yourself, *How did I get here? What have I done?”*

The pack raced alongside the truck. Hounds and master shimmered like starlight against the velvet backdrop, twisted like funnels of smoke. The Huntsman blew me a kiss and I tromped the accelerator and they fell off the pace. One of the hounds leaped the embankment rail and loped after me, snout pressed to the centerline. It darted into the shadows an instant before being overtaken and smooshed by a tractor trailer.

I pushed beyond exhaustion and well into the realm of zombification. The highway was a wormhole between dimensions and Graham occasionally whispered to me through the radio even though I’d hit the kill switch. And what he’d said really worked on me. What *had* I done to come to this pass? Maybe Sharon left me because I was a sonofabitch. Maybe Jones screwing me over was karma. The Wild Hunt might be a case of the universe getting Even-Steven (pardon the pun) with me. Thank the gods I didn’t have a bottle of liquor handy or else I’d have spent the remainder of the long night totally blitzed and sobbing like a baby over misdeeds real and imagined. Instead, I popped the blister on a packet of No-Doze and put the hammer down.

I parked and slept once in a turnout for a couple of hours during the middle of the day when traffic ran thickest. I risked no more than that. The Hunt had its rules regarding the taking of prey in front of too many witnesses, but I didn’t have the balls to challenge those traditions.

The Chevy died outside Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Every gauge went crazy and plumes of steam boiled from the radiator. I got the rig towed to a salvage yard and transferred Minerva and my meager belongings to a compact rental. We were back on the road before breakfast and late afternoon saw us aboard the ferry from Port Sanger, New York, to Lamprey Isle.

What to say about LI West (as Jack Fort referred to it)? Nineteen miles north to south and about half that at its widest, the whole curved into a malformed crescent, the Man in the Moon's visage peeled from Luna and partially submerged in the Atlantic. Its rocky shore was sculpted by the clash of wind and sea; a forest of pine, maple, and oak spanned the interior. Home of hoot owls and red squirrels; good deer hunting along the secret winding trails, I'd heard. Native burial mounds and mysterious megaliths, I'd also heard.

The main population center, Lamprey Township (pop. 999), nestled in a cove on the southwestern tip of the island. Jack had mentioned that the town had been established as a fishing village in the early 19th Century; prior to that, smugglers and slavers made it their refuge from privateers and local authorities. A den of illicit gambling and sodomy, I'd heard. Allegedly, the name arose from a vicious species of eels that infested the local waters. Long as a man's arm, the locals claimed.

Lamprey Township was a fog-shrouded settlement hemmed by the cove and spearhead shoals, a picket of evergreens. A gloomy cathedral fortress reared atop a cliff streaked with seagull shit and pocked by cave entrances. Lovers Leap. In town, everybody wore flannel and rain slickers, boots and sock caps. A folding knife and mackinaw crowd. Everything was covered in salt rime, everything tasted of brine. Piloting the rental down Main Street between boardwalks, compartment of the car flushed with soft blue-red lights reflecting from the ocean, I thought this wouldn't be such a bad place to die. Release my essential salts back into the primordial cradle.

Jack's cabin lay inland at the far end of a dirt spur. Built in the same era as the founding of Lamprey Township, he'd bought it from Katarina Veniti, a paranormal romance author who'd become jaded with all of the tourists and yuppies moving onto "her" island during the last recession. A stone and timber longhouse with ye old-fashioned shingles and moss on the roof surrounded by an acre of sloping yard overgrown with tall, dead grass. An oak had uprooted during a recent windstorm and toppled across the drive.

Minerva and I hoofed it the last quarter of a mile. The faceless moon dripped and shone through scudding clouds and a vault of branches. The house sat in darkness except for a light shining from the kitchen window.

“Welcome to Kat’s island,” Jack said, and coughed. He reclined in the shadows on a porch swing. Moonlight glinted from the bottle in his hand, the barrel of the pump-action shotgun across his knees. He wore a wool coat, dock-worker’s cap snug over his brow, wool pants, and lace-up hiking boots. When he stood to doff his sock hat and shake my hand, I realized his clothes hung loose as sails, that he was frail and shaky.

“Jesus, man,” I said, shaken at the sight of him. He appeared more of an apparition than the bona fide spirit pursuing me. I understood why he didn’t mind the idea of the Hunt invading his happy home. The man was so emaciated he should’ve been hanging near the blackboard in science class; a hundred pounds lighter since I’d last seen him, easy. He’d shaved his head and beard to gray stubble; his pallid flesh was dry and hot, his eyes sparkled like bits of quartz. He stank of gun oil, smoke, and rotting fruit.

“Yea. The big C. Doc hit me with the bad news this spring. Deathwatch around the Fort. I sent the pets to live with my sister.” He smiled and gestured at the woods. “Just you, me, and the trees. I got nothing better to do than help an old pal in his hour of need.” He led the way inside. The kitchen was cheerily lighted and we took residence at the dining table where he poured me a glass of whiskey and listened to my recap of the trip from Alaska.

“I hope you’ve got a plan,” I said.

“Besides blasting them with grandma’s twelve gauge?” He patted the stock of his shotgun where it lay on the table. “We’re going out like a pair of Vikings.”

“I’d be more excited if you had a flamethrower, or some grenades.”

“Me too. Me too. I got a few sticks of dynamite for fishing and plenty of ammo.”

“Dynamite is good. This is going to be full on Hollywood. Fast cars, shirtless women, explosions…”

“Man, I don’t even know if it’ll detonate. The shit’s been stashed in a leaky box in the cellar for a hundred years. Honestly, my estimation is, we’re hosed. Totally up shit creek. Our sole advantage is, prey doesn’t usually fight back. Graham’s powerful, he’s a spirit, or a monster, whatever. But he’s new on the job, right? That may be our ray of sunshine. That, and

according to the literature, the Pack doesn't fancy crossing large bodies of open water. These haunts prefer ice and snow." Jack coughed into a handkerchief. Belly-ripping, Doc Holliday kind of coughing. He wiped his mouth and had a belt of whiskey. His cheeks were blotched. "Anyway, I brought you here for another reason. This house belonged to a sorcerer once upon a time. Type they used to burn at the stake. An unsavory guy named Ewers Welloc. The Wellocs own most of this island and there's a hell of a story in that. For now, let me say Ewers was blackest in a family of black sheep. The villagers were scared shitless of him, were convinced he practiced necromancy and other dark arts on the property. Considering the stories Kat told me and some of the funky stuff I've found stashed around here, it's hard to dismiss the villagers' claims as superstition."

I could only wonder what he'd unearthed, or Kat before him. Jack bought the place for a dollar and suddenly that factoid assumed an ominous significance. "What were you guys up to? You, Kat, and Graham attended college together. Did you form a club?"

"A witch coven. I kid, I kid. Wasn't college… We met at the Sugar Tree Hill writers' retreat. Five days of sun, fun, booze, and hand jobs. There were quite a few young authors there who went on to become quasi-prominent. Many a friendships and enmities are formed at Sugar Tree Hill. The three of us really clicked. Me and Kat were wild, man, wild. Nothing on Graham's scale, though. He took it way farther. As you can see."

"Yeah." I sipped my drink.

"Me and Graham were pretty tight until he schlepped to Alaska and started in with the sled dogs. Communication tapered off and after a while we fell out of touch. I received a few letters. Guy had the world's shittiest penmanship; would've taken a cryptologist to have deciphered them. I thought he suffered from cabin fever."

"Seemed okay to me," I said. "Gregarious. Popular. Handsome. He was well-regarded."

"Yea, yea… The rot was on the inside," Jack said and I almost spilled my glass. He didn't notice. "As it happens, my hole card is an ace. Lamprey Isle was settled long before the whites landed. Maybe before the Mohawk, Mohican, Seneca. Nobody knows who these people were, but none of the

records are flattering. This mystery tribe left megaliths and cairns on islands and along the coast. A few of those megaliths are in the woods around here. Legend has it that the tribe erected them for use in necromantic rituals. Summon, bind, banish. Like Robert Howard hypothesized in his Conan tales—if the demonic manifests on the mortal plane, it becomes subject to the laws of physics, and cold Hyperborean steel. Howard was on to something."

"Fairy rocks, huh?" I said. The whiskey was hitting me.

"Got any problem believing in the Grim Reaper with a hunting knife and a pack of werewolves chasing you from one end of the continent to the other?"

I tried again. "So. Fairy rocks."

"Fuckin' A, boy-o. Fairy rocks. And double aught buckshot."

We took shifts at watch until dawn. The Hunt didn't arrive and so passed a peaceful evening. I slept for three hours; the most I'd had in a week. Jack fried bacon and eggs for breakfast and we drank a pot of black coffee. Afterward he gave me a tour of the house and the immediate grounds. Much of the house gathered dust, exuding the vibe particular to dwellings of bachelors and widowers. Since his wife flew the coop, Jack's remit had contracted to kitchen, bath, and living room. Too close to a tomb for my liking.

Tromping around the property with our breath streaming slantwise, he showed me a megalith hidden in the underbrush between a pair of sugar maples. Huge and misshapen beneath layers of slime and moss, the stone cast a shadow over us. It radiated the chill of an ice block. One of several in the vicinity, I soon learned.

Jack wasn't eager to hang around it. "There were lots of animal bones piled in the bushes. You'll never catch any animals living here. Wasn't the two decks of Camels I smoked every day since junior high that gave me cancer. It's these damned things. Near as I can figure, they're siphons. Let's pray the effect is magnified upon extra-dimensional beings. Otherwise, Graham will eat our bullets and spit them back at us."

The megalith frightened me. I imagined it as a huge, predatory insect disguised as a stone, its ethereal rostrum stabbing an artery and sucking my life essence. I wondered if the stones were indigenous or if the ancient tribes had fashioned them somehow. I'd never know. "Graham's an occultist. Think he's dumb enough to walk into a trap?"

"Graham ain't Graham anymore. He's the Huntsman." Jack scanned the red-gold horizon and muttered dire predictions of another storm front descending from the west. "Trouble headed this way," he said and hustled me back to the house. We locked and shuttered everything and took positions in the living room; Jack with his shotgun, me with my pistol and dog. Seated on the leather Italian sofa, bolstered by a pitcher of vodka and lemonade, we watched ancient episodes of *The Rockford Files* and *Ironside* and waited.

Several minutes past 2 p.m. the air dimmed to velvety purple and the trees behind the house thrashed and rain spattered the windows. The power died. I whistled a few bars of the *Twilight Zone* theme, shifted the pistol into my shooting hand.

He grinned and went to the window and stood there, a blue silhouette. The booze in my tumbler quivered and the horn bellowed, right on top of us. Glass exploded and I was bleeding from the head and the hand that I'd raised to protect my face. Wood splintered and doors caved in all over the house and the hounds rolled into the living room; long, sinuous figures of pure malevolence with ruby-bright eyes, bodies low to the floor and moving fast, teeth, tongues, appetite. I squinted and fired twice from the hip and a bounding figure jerked short. Minerva pounced, snarling and tearing in frenzy, her doggy mind reverting to the swamps and jungles and caves of her ancestors. Jack's shotgun blazed a stroke of yellow flame and sheared the arm of a fiend who'd scuttled in close. Partially deafened and blinded, I couldn't keep track of much after that. Squeezed the trigger four more times, popped the speed loader with six fresh slugs, kept firing at shadows that leaped and sprang. The Riders of the Apocalypse and Friends galloped through the house; our own private Armageddon. More glass whirled and bits of wood and shreds of drapery; a section of ceiling collapsed in a cascade of sparks and rapidly blooming white carnations of drywall dust. Now the gods could watch.

Thunder of gunshots, Minerva growling, the damned, yodeling cries of the hounds, and crackling bones wound around my brain in a knotted spool. I got knocked down in the melee and watched Minerva swing past, lazily flying, paws limp, guts raveling behind her. I'd owned many dogs, Minerva was my first and only pet, my dearest friend. She was a mewling puppy once more, then inert bone and slack hide, and gone, gone, the last pinprick of my old life snuffed.

Something was on fire. Oily black smoke seethed through a vertical impact crater where the far wall had stood. Clouds and smoke boiled there. A couple of fingers were missing from my left hand and blood pulsed forth; a shiny, crimson bouquet thickening into a lump, a wax sculpture from the house of horrors, an object example of Medieval torture. It didn't hurt. Didn't feel like anything. My jacket had been sliced, and the flesh beneath it so that my innards glistened in the cold air. That didn't hurt either. Instead, I was buoyed by the sense of impending finality. This wouldn't take much longer by the looks of it. I pulled the jacket closed as best I could and began the laborious process of standing. Almost done, almost home.

Jack cursed through a mouthful of dirt. The Huntsman had entered the fray and caught his skull in one splayed hand and sawed through his throat with the jagged dagger hewn from Stone Age crystal. The Huntsman sawed with so much vigor that Jack's limbs flopped crazily, a crash test dummy at the moment of impact. Graham let Jack's carcass thump to the sodden carpet among the savaged bodies of the pack. He pointed at me, him playing the lead man of a rock band shouting out to his audience. Yeah, the gods were with us, and no doubt.

"So, we meet again." He licked his lips and wiped the Satan knife against his gory mackinaw. He approached, shuffling like a seal through the smoldering gloom, lighted by an inner radiance that bathed him in a weird, pale glow as cold and alien as the Aurora Borealis. The death-light of Hades, presumably. His eyes were hidden by the brim of his hat, but his smile curved, joyless and cruel.

I made it to my feet and scrambled backward over the flaming wreckage of coffee tables and easy chairs, the upended couch, and into the hall. All but dead, but still fighting, an animal to the end. Blood came from me in ropes, in sheets. Graham followed, smiling, smiling. Doorframes buckled as his

shoulders brushed them. He swiped the knife in a loose and easy diamond pattern. The knife hissed as it rehearsed my evisceration. I wasn't worried about that. I was long past worry. Thoughts of vengeance dominated.

"You killed my dog." Blood bubbles plopped from my lips and that's never good. Another dose of ferocious, joyful melancholy spurred me onward. I pitched the empty revolver at his head, watched the gun glance aside and spin away. My tears froze to salt on my cheeks. Arctic ice groaned beneath my boots as the sea swelled, yearned toward the moon. The sea drained the warmth from me, taking back what it had given in the beginning.

"*You* killed your dog, mon frère. You did for our buddy Jack, too. Bringing me and my boys here like this. Don't beat yourself up. It's a volunteer army, right?"

I turned away, sliding, overbalancing. My legs folded and I slumped before a fallen timber, its charred length licked by small flames. The blood from my ruined hand sizzled and spat. I rubbed my face against the floor, painting myself a war mask of gore and charcoal. By the time he'd crossed the gap between us and seized my hair to flip me onto my back, at the precise moment he sank the blade into my chest, the fuse on the glycerin-wet stick of dynamite was a nub disappearing into its burrow.

Graham's exultant expression changed. "Well, I forgot Jack was a fisherman," he said. That fucking knife kept traveling, the irresistible force, and I embraced it, and him.

The Eternal Footman clapped.

After an eon of vectoring through infinite night, the door to the tilt-a-whirl opened and I plummeted and hit the earth hard enough to raise dust. Mud instead. An angelic choir serenaded me from stage left, beyond a screen of tall trees and fog. Wagner as interpreted by Homer's sirens. The voices rose and fell, sweetly demanding my blood, the heat of my bones. That sounded fine. I imagined the soft, red lips parted, imagined that they glowed as the Huntsman glowed, but as an expression of erotic passion rather than malice, and I longed to open a vein for them…

I came to, paralyzed. Pieces of me lay scattered across the backyard. For the best that I couldn't turn my neck to properly survey the damage.

Graham sprawled across from me, face-down in the wet leaves. Wisps of smoke curled from him. He shuddered violently and lifted his head. Bones and joints snapped into place again. The left eye shimmered with reflections of fire. The right eye was black. Neither were human.

He said, "Are you dead? Are you dead? Or are you playing possum? I think you're mostly dead. It doesn't matter. Hell is come as you are." He shook himself and began to crawl in my direction, slithering with a horrible serpent-like elasticity.

Mostly dead must've meant 99.9 percent dead, because I couldn't even blink, much less raise a hand to forestall his taking my skull for the mantle, my soul to the bad place. A red haze obscured my vision and the world receded, receded. The sirens in the forest called again, louder yet. Graham hesitated, his glance drawn to the voices that came from many directions now and sang in many languages.

Jack staggered from the smoking ruins of the house. He appeared to have been dunked in a vat of blood. He held his shotgun in a death grip. "The bell tolls for you, Stevie," he said and blew off Graham's left leg. He racked the slide and blasted Graham's right leg to smithereens below the kneecap. Graham screamed and whipped around and tried to hamstring his tormentor. Not quite fast enough. Jack proved agile for an old guy with a slit throat.

The siren choir screamed in pleasure. *Blam! Blam!* Graham's hands went bye-bye. The next slug severed his spine, judging by the ragdoll effect. His body went limp and he screamed some more and I'm sure he would've happily leaped on Jack and eaten him alive if Jack hadn't already dismembered him with that fancy shotgun work. Jack said something I didn't catch. Might've uttered a curse in a foreign tongue, a Latin epithet. He stuck the barrel under Graham's chin and took his head off with the last round.

I cheered telepathically. Then I finished dying. The score as the curtains closed was so fucking beautiful.

This time I emerged from eternal night to Minerva kissing my face. I lay on my back in the kitchen. Gray daylight poured through a hole in the ceiling along with steady trickles of water from busted pipes.

Jack slouched at the table, which was stacked with various odds and ends. His shoulders were wide and round as boulders and he'd gained back all the weight cancer had stolen; his old self, only far more so. He clutched a bottle of Old Crow and watched me intently. He said, "Stay away from the light, kid. It's fire and lava."

I spat clotted blood. Finally, I said, "He's dead?"

"Again."

"Singing…" I managed.

"Oh, yeah. Don't listen. That's the vampire stones. They're fat on Graham's energy."

"How'd I get in here?"

"I dragged you by your hair."

The world kept solidifying around me, and my senses along with it. Me, Minerva, and Jack being alive didn't compute. Except, as the cobwebs cleared from my mind, it made a sinister kind of sense. I laid my hand on Minerva's fur and noticed the red sparks in her eyes, how goddamned long and white her teeth were. "Oh, shit," I said.

"Yeah," Jack said. He set aside the bottle and shrugged into the Huntsman's impeccable snow-white mackinaw. Perfect fit. Next came the Huntsman's hat. Different on Jack; broader and of a style I didn't recognize. The red and black crest was gone. Real antlers in its stead. A shadow crossed his expression and the light in the room gathered in his eyes. "Get up," he said. Thunder rumbled.

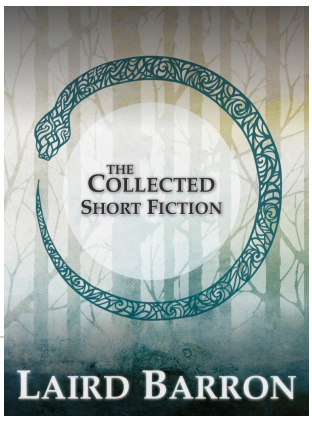
And I did. Not a mark on me. I felt quite hale and hearty, in fact. Hideous strength coursed through my limbs. I thought of my philandering ex-wife, her music teacher beau, and hideous fantasies coursed through my mind. I must've retained a tiny fragment of humanity because I managed to look away from that vista of terrible and splendorous vengeance. For the moment, at least. I said, "Where now?"

Jack leaned on a long, barbed spear that had replaced his emptied shotgun. “There’s this guy in Mexico I’d like to visit,” he said. He handed me the flint knife and the herald’s horn. “Do the honors, kid.”

“Oh, Stanley. It’ll be good to see you again.” I pressed the horn to my lips and winded it, once. It tasted cold and sweet. The kitchen wall disintegrated and the shockwave traveled swiftly, rippling grass and causing birds to lift in panic from the trees. I imagined Stanley Jones, somewhere far to the south, seated on his veranda, tequila at hand, *The Sun* balanced on his rickety knee, ear cocked, straining to divine the origin of the dim bellow carried by the wind.

Minerva bayed. She gathered her sleek, killing bulk and hurtled across the yard and into the woods. I patted the hilt of the knife and followed. One last glance over my shoulder—Jack laughed and his laugh became the roar of a storm. He loomed above the top of the ruined house and his black horns eclipsed the white sun.

More Dark



This version taken from *The Beautiful Thing That Awaits Us All and Other Stories*, 2013

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On the afternoon train from Poughkeepsie to New York City for a thing at the Kremlin Bar-John and me and an empty seat that should've been Jack's, except Jack was dead going on three years, body or no body. Hudson out the right-hand window, shining like a scale. Winter light fading fast, blending the ice and snow and water into a steely red. More heavy weather coming, they said. A blizzard; the fifth in as many weeks. One body blow after another for the Northeast and no end in sight.

We were sneaking shots of Glenfiddich from a flask. I watched a kid across the aisle watching me from beneath eyelids the tint of blue-black scarab beetle shells. He wore a set of headphones that merely dampened the Deftones screaming "Change." His eardrums were surely bleeding to match the trickle from his nose. He seemed content.

Another slug of scotch and back to John with the flask.

I thought of the revolver waiting for me in the dresser of my hotel room. I could hear it ticking. I dreamed about that fucking gun all of the time. It loomed as large as a planet-killing asteroid in my mind. It shined with silvery fire against satin nothingness, slowly turning in place, a symbolic prop from a lost Hitchcock film, the answer to the meaning of my life. The ultimate negation. A Rossi.38 Special bought on the cheap at a pawnshop on 4th Avenue, now snug in a sock drawer. One bullet in the chamber, fated to nest in my heart or brain.

My wife of a decade had mysteriously (or not so mysteriously if one asked her friends) walked out six weeks ago, suitcase in one hand, ticket to the Bahamas in the other. My marching orders were to be gone by the time she got back with a new tan. Yeah, I wasn't taking the divorce well. Nor the

fiasco with the novel, nor a dozen impending deadlines, chief among them a story I owed S.T. for *Dark Membrane II*, an anthology in homage to the works of H. P. Lovecraft. This last item I hoped to resolve prior to dissipating into the ether, but at the moment it wasn't looking favorable. Still, when marooned in the desert and down to crawling inch by bloody inch, that's what one does. Crawl, and again.

John said, "I saw *him*, once. The Author Formerly known As… A while back, when the gang was in Glasgow for Worldcon. Me, Jack, Jody, Paul, Livia, Wilum, Ellen, Canadian Simon and English Simon, Gary Mac, Ian, Richard G, both Nicks-Berkeley Nick and New York Nick. Some others… all of us wandering from pub to pub after dark. Hal still lived in Scotland, so he showed us around, although he was drunk, as usual, and I figured we'd find the con hotel again by morning, *if* we were lucky. A crowd busted out of a club and this chick, in a leather jacket with her hair shaved to about half an inch of fuzz and dyed pink, almost knocked me over as she elbowed by like a striker for the Blackheath Football Club. Hal stared at her as she stomped away, then leaned over to me and whispered gravely, 'Whoa, lad, that'd be like fookin' a coconut, wouldn't it?' " John was a tall, burly fellow of Scotch-Irish descent; an adjunct professor at SUNY New Paltz. He wore glasses, tweeds, and a tie whether he was lecturing or mowing the lawn. Honestly, he usually appeared as if he'd *just* mowed a lawn, such was his habitual dishevelment. Nonetheless, his charisma was undeniable. The more his beard grayed and his hair thinned, the more irresistible the world at large found him, especially the ladies. Like Machiavelli, he was becoming dangerous in middle age and I hoped he used his powers for good rather than evil.

As John spoke, he cradled the marionettes, Poe and As You Know Bob, in his lap. Poe dressed in black, naturally, and had a pencil mustache and overlarge, soulful eyes, all the better to reflect sardonic ennui. As You Know Bob was clad in a silvery coverall and collar-a spacesuit sans helmet. Bob's shaggy hair and beard were white, its eyes a cornflower blue that bespoke earnestness and honesty, if not wisdom. The puppets were on loan from Clara, John's twelve year old daughter. She intended to become a world class puppeteer, just like John Malkovich in *Being John Malkovich.* Disturbing, but admirable.

Let’s be crystal clear. I hate puppets. Hate them. They descend from a demonic line parallel to mimes and clowns and are wholly of the devil, especially the lifelike variety. The uncanny valley is not one I’ve ever enjoyed strolling through. John wasn’t particularly keen on puppets either. However, as a prolific author with a constant itinerary of speaking engagements he’d twigged to their utility as icebreakers at readings and lectures where the audience was often mixed-the little bastards were perfect to talk down to the kiddies (*As you know, Bob, this novel is the eleventh in the saga of non-Euclidian horrors invading Earth from the X-Space*!) while keeping the high schoolers and adults reasonably amused throughout the expositional phase.

John brought his marionettes because we were going to witness (and witness is the best way to describe it) a public reading by the reclusive horror author formerly known as Tom L, or simply L to his small, yet fervent cult of devotees. L featured puppets and marionettes in his tales, alluding to humanity’s suffering at the whim of the gods, and owned an exquisite selection of the things, each handcrafted by master designer W. Lindblad, a native Texan bookseller renowned for his macabre dolls and enormous collection of rare and banned volumes of perverse occult lore. Also renowned for being a career felon, but that didn’t usually come up until whoever mentioned his name was as drunk as were getting at the moment.

I assumed John hoped for an autograph, maybe a few words of kinship from L. I wasn’t quite clear. Nor did I understand his obsessive fascination with the guy. L was a skilled, if obscure, author of weird tales, operating within the precincts of such classical masters as Lovecraft and Robert Aickman, tempering these influences with his own brand of dread and showmanship, much of it fueled by a loathing of corporate life, and, if one took him at his word, life itself. He’d written dozens of horror and dark fantasy tales over the years, the bulk of them collected in a tome entitled *Enemy of Man*. The book had sold well enough to warrant several foreign editions and garnered almost every award in the field. It was, as the *Washington Post* proclaimed, an instant classic.

I owned a cheap paperback reprint of the original immaculate hardcover, albeit mine contained lengthy story notes and a preface by the author. My

impression of L's work was lukewarm as I found his glib poohpoohing of the master Robert Aickman as a formative influence of his disingenuous considering their artistic similarities, and L's reduction of human characters to ciphers a trifle off-putting. L the author was vastly more interested in the machinations of malign forces against humanity than the individuals involved in said struggle. Nonetheless, his skill with allegory, simile, atmosphere and setting was impeccable and his style unique despite its debt to classical literary ancestry. His gloom and groan regarding the Infernal Bureaucracy wasn't my cup of tea, yet it possessed a certain resonance among the self loathing, chronically inebriated, perpetually persecuted set. However, there was the man himself, and it was L the man that turned me cold.

L dwelt in a moribund American Heartland city (although independent confirmation of his residence and bona fides were lacking) that had been abandoned by most of the citizenry and at least half the rats. Afflicted by a severe mood disorder, he maintained few contacts among the professional writing community, albeit his associates were erudite men, scholars and theorists such as himself. Perhaps this hermit-philosopher persona is what eventually cemented his status as a quasi-guru whose fictive meditations upon cosmic horror and Man's minuteness in the universe gradually shifted to relentless proselytizing of antinatalist propaganda in the form of email interviews, random tracts produced on basement presses, and one full-blown trade paperback essay entitled *Horror of Being*, or *HoB* as his acolytes dubbed it. That book was published to much clamor amongst his fans and a tentative round of golf claps by the critics who weren't certain which way to jump when it came to analyzing L's eerily lucid lunacy. Nobody enjoyed receiving death threats or dead rats in the post. On the other hand, endorsing such maxims as "The kindest and most noble act any sapient being may commit is to never procreate" and "Consciousness is an abomination" wasn't too spiffy on a journalist's credentials.

John continued: "We stumbled back to the hotel eventually, although I don't recall how we got there, and sat around the lounge comforting Paul about a terrible *Strange Vistas* shellacking of his novel. Somebody on staff had it in for him, no two ways about it. Once HBO bought it for a series, the

asshats sweetened right up about his new books and SV begged him on bended knee for an interview. How convenient, eh?"

"Screw SV and that knob job who runs feature reviews," I said and grabbed the flask for another swig. I'd always had the luck of the Irish when it came to press, but *Strange Vistas* was notorious for the suspect quality of its reviews department, mainly because it was helmed by a blithering idiot who desperately wanted to be his generation's John Clute, and was instead doomed to a life of disappointment and neglect, which while typical and deserved fare for much of the Brit Lit scene, no doubt stung like a motherfucker. Among the ezine's handful of reputable freelance contributors dwelt a rotten core of ankle biters who would savage a book like a terrier shaking a rat on the principle that bile drove traffic and brought some, yea any, attention to themselves that would be otherwise lacking if dependent upon their own merits. Look at me! For the love of God! reviewers. Fortunately, no one actually read the rag but friends, family, proofreaders, chronic masturbators, and the aggrieved authors themselves.

"Holy shit, don't utter such heresy near me!" John made a sign in the air. "The woods have eyes, the fields ears. That effing bastard Niall-whatever who edits the thing will have me killed or blackballed, whichever is worse."

"Niall is so famous and respected he needs no surname. He has never heard of you."

"You'll be singing a different tune if he gets a hold of your next book, you ham-fisted hack. I don't know why he called you ham-fisted. They're rather delicate, actually."

"Speaking of coconuts," I said.

"Oh, yeah. Here we go."

"When I was a young stud, I'd dated this girl for a few weeks. It was all new and mysterious. We went to the ocean with another couple, had a fire on the beach, drank some wine, all that tediously romantic sort of crap. On the way home, me and the guy are up front in his car, discussing rock versus heavy metal, the girls giggling and bickering in the back. I hear the distinctive snap of a bra coming undone, more giggling, then smell coconut scent. The guy's eyes pop out of his head and he almost swerves into the ditch trying to adjust the rearview mirror. I turn around and by thunder, the

ladies have peeled off their tops and are giving each other a coconut lotion rubdown for no logical reason whatsoever, except for our viewing pleasure."

"My god."

"Whomever. Trust me, words don't do the scene justice."

"Nothing like that ever happens to me." There was a world of bitterness in that admission.

"I have lived a varied life," I said. "Short, but varied."

"Great, now I got sidetracked with visions of gleaming breasts and… Yeah, there was a point to the bit about Scotland. If I could only concentrate…"

"L was in the house?" An easy guess on my part, but something in my brain shifted with the *rightness* of it as the words were uttered. The phantom click of a pistol's hammer cocking.

"Yes! The fabulous bastard materialized at the edge of the lounge near the bar. The lights were low and he looked ghostly with his wild hair and strange eyes. He wore an old-fashioned suit with a white carnation in the lapel. And he carried a blackthorn cane. A twisted, sinister accouterment, that cane. I bet there was a cavalry saber hidden inside." John's expression was as wistful as Bob's eyes were blue.

"I thought he avoided conventions. Ruin his image. Le Hermit and all."

"So they say. Although there are rumors. People know people who spotted him at the bar sipping Ardbeg at World Horror in '89, haunting the hotel terrace at the World Science Fiction Convention in '97, sitting in the back of a horror lit panel at Comicon whenever. Jack swore they had a ten minute conversation in the green room at Readercon in 2007. There was a power outage and they sat in the dark and smoked a joint and discussed the suicide cults in Japan. There's a haunted forest at the base of Mt. Fuji. College students off themselves in droves every year. Suicide Mecca. Japanese government tries to keep it hushed up, but y'know."

"For a man who loathes existence, you'd think he'd be even more on board with suicide. It's right for others, not him…"

"Oh, L is definitely against. Antinatalists abhor suicide. Goes counter to the code."

“Right, ending their miserable existences would trump the much greater joy of pissing and moaning about their miserable existences.”

‘That, and it’s big fun to inflict one’s contrarian views upon the hapless.”

“Hapless and gullible. Some people are born looking for a crock of shit to get their head stuck in. Jack didn’t tell me he met L.”

“He only mentioned it to me a few months before he died, disappeared, whatever.”

“That’s unsettling,” I said.

“I have to agree,” John said. “But it’s a coincidence. L didn’t clip Jack. Hell, Jack probably didn’t even really meet L. He got high and dreamed the whole thing. Plus the dude was a hell of a liar.” He laughed and had a drink by way of genuflection. One simply didn’t take Jack’s name in vain.

“No, man,” I said. “It’s unsettling because Jack was obviously hallucinating at the end. That’s a sign of way too many drugs, or mental illness. Maybe he was bipolar. We could’ve helped him.” I tried not to wince at the irony of my observation.

“Sorry, I’m not gonna kick my own ass over what happened to Jack. For your information, I really did spot L. Michael C was sitting next to me. He saw the guy too, before he walked away. I ran over to see if I could flag him down. L was gone baby gone, of course.”

“Of course,” I said. “That’s how men of mystery roll. And ghosts. And leprechauns.”

“Michael’s taking us for a few drinks before the show. You can ask him yourself. He’s keen on the subject. Actually knows L from the old days. Calls ’em the cat food days instead of salad days.”

The last thing either of us needed were more drinks. On the other hand, who was I to turn down a chance to booze with Michael C, an author nearly as cultish and reclusive as the inimitable L? Besides, Michael only drank the finest single malt, expense be damned.

The train rattled into a tunnel and darkness. By the faint plastic glow of the interior lights I had a rush of vertigo that tricked my body into believing the passenger car no longer moved laterally, but had shifted to the vertical plane and was descending at tremendous velocity, an express elevator to the pits.

Streaks of red flickered against the windows. The kid with the earphones glanced at me. His earphones resembled the curved horns of a ram. His eyes reflected the void. He smiled. His smile was the void.

I gave him the finger.

Michael C awaited us at Grand Central Station. We immediately repaired to a hole-in-the-wall with an Irish house band and a sexy bartender decked in a leather bustier. Thank Jesus, Mary, and the Saints for those.

Most of the clientele were faux bikers and imitation punk rockers. I suspected their tattoos peeled and peacock-hued mohawks combed over to make office dress code come Monday morning. The garage music banged and wheedled with stops and gaps that hurt my brain. I ordered a round of Glenrothes and we toasted good old dead Jack one more time.

Michael was clad in black, as ever. Black silk shirt and string tie, black slacks and black wingtips. His hair was black and curled spring-tight. He was pale, gaunt of cheek, and wiry as a hound, ever restless without actually twitching or fidgeting. His eyes, though. They shivered and crackled. He proved quite pleased to discuss Tom L.

“Sure, we saw him in Glasgow. Dude was there, scoping the joint. I recognized him right away.”

“What does he do? For a living, I mean.” Anybody who knows anything knows writers don’t survive off earnings from *writing*. We all have real jobs such as being teachers, dish washers, drug dealers, and crack whores.

“Works as an underwriter. Or writes technical manuals for research and development at an auto plant. Or he heads a lab at a defense contractor. Point is, nobody knows what he does outside of writing because he says something different to whomever asks. Wilum and S.T. told me L bought several blocks of abandoned properties for a dollar and that he lives completely alone. Pushes a shopping cart to and from an outlet store like a bag lady. Spends evenings on the stoop in a pair of John Lennons and a peacoat, smoking foreign cigarettes and watching kids smash in the windows of wrecked cars. Sleeps in a king-sized poster-bed in the penthouse of a historic brownstone that used to be a famous hotel where all

the Mo-Town singers and execs held court. Just him now, and the things that go bump in the night." Michael had snagged Poe and was experimenting with the marionette's strings as he talked, causing Poe to strut and lurch on the tabletop in a creepy pantomime of moonwalking, then spinning like a 1970s break-dance king performing a herky-jerky tarantella. In sixty seconds Michael had gotten more of the hang of it than John had in a whole year. John shrugged and cheerfully kept at his scotch, hugging Bob in the crook of his elbow like the protective father he was.

I said, "Didn't Nathan B post an expose on his blog? *Exploding the Myth of L*?"

Michael nodded. "As a joke, yes. A tongue-in-cheek deconstruction of the L mystique. Nathan thinks, or at least he *likes* to think, L doesn't exist. His theory is a few writers got together during the 1980s and created their very own Richard Bachman. He even went so far as to out that British hack, Mark S, as one of the original instigators, although that's a mighty generous accusation considering Mark S's best ideas were all previously written by Lovecraft, Aickman."

"Yeah, I read something by Mark S-*The White Paws*. That was his bestseller. Moved thirty-six copies at the British Fantasy Convention when everybody got drunk and thought they were signing up for a charity drive."

"*The White Paws* was followed closely by *The Man Who Collected Barbara Cartland,*" John said. "But it didn't do so hot, alas."

"Kicked ass in the Commonwealth," I said.

"Does that even count?"

"Nah, not really. I apologize."

I hadn't thought much of Mark S's *The White Paws*. The sorry bastard worshipped at the altar of L and his work came off all the worse by way of comparison. L lite, so to speak.

Sadly, he'd been famously murdered by another author, an English lady he'd cyberstalked for ages. They'd had an ongoing feud over a metafictional story good ol' woman-hating S wrote that painted her in an unflattering light. Then the female author had the audacity to go and win the British Fantasy Award a few times while S was passed over without

comment, as usual. Despite his public disdain for industry laurels and accolades, he snapped and began haunting internet message boards the lady frequented, and posting pseudo-anonymous rants about how girls like her only won awards because they looked fetching in a skirt.

He finally crossed the line by rummaging through trash bins outside her apartment one night and she, having lost her wits due to S's relentless fear campaign, sneaked upon him and cracked his skull with a ball peen hammer, cut off his head and stored it in the freezer behind a frozen Butterball turkey, or whatever the fuck brand they sell in jolly old England. She was currently finishing up a remarkably short stint at a women's prison and her book sales were sensational.

I'd heard that S's funeral reception was attended by exactly one person: feared and dreaded genre editor S Jones who'd show up for anything that offered free alcohol and who'd once infamously hailed Mark S as the savior of British horror, much to everyone's eternal chagrin. At least Jones sprang for the wreath. HOCUS, the science fiction industry magazine, gave S a one-sentence obituary, which was more than they'd given any of his books at least. All very lurid, as befitted the community.

Michael said, "Anyway, Nate hypothesized the L Syndrome was a sophisticated long con. A masterful grift. Dead letter drops, fake email addresses, phony author bios, author photo of some guy dead since the Roaring Twenties. Started as a game, each of them penning gibberish and sending it to *Space & Time*, *Horror Show*, *Night Cry*, etc., etc. It got out of hand and editors actually bought the stuff and next thing you know, Tom L is a hot property, a horror wunderkind, the underground antidote to Stephen King and Dean Koontz, the Jack Spicer headbutt to Rod McKuen's yammering gob that is category horror. The gig got stale years ago, but now these pranksters are stuck with carrying on the charade. Hard to let go of those royalty checks. Nathan is wrong, of course. I've corresponded with L since 1988. We were pen pals on Usenet for a while before he got so reclusive. Met him on five other occasions. Went to his house once. The man is real as real gets."

"You visited his house? Goddamn it!" John pounded the table with his big fist and our shot glasses jumped. "That pisses me off more than the story you told me on the train." He glared at me.

“Today is the day to face the fact you are a frustrated and unfulfilled sonofabitch,” I said. “And if you’d rather ogle L’s house than coconut oil dripping off a perfectly formed breast, well, I am not certain what kind of friend you are.”

“There’s no reason I can’t do both!”

Michael continued patiently. “It was just an apartment L stayed in after his wife died. Or disappeared. Similar to the Jack situation. Whatever the case, L camped for a while before he picked up and moved to where he is now. Nothing special, that apartment. Neat as you please, though. Sterile as a gynecologist’s office.”

“What, no copies of the *Necronomicon* lying on the coffee table?” I said. Probably sarcastically.

“Just something about the history of puppets. No bodies hanging in the closet either.”

I didn’t ask the obvious: what L was like, because I really didn’t give a shit. So I asked about our good buddy Nathan instead. “Where’s Nathan? He’s in town, right?” Nathan had been a bartender in New Orleans during the aughts. He got out right before the hurricane and the floods. His daughter was thirteen and working on a PhD in nuclear physics at Cal Tech. Meanwhile, he lived in a shack in South Carolina and wrote the most delicately horrific short stories I’d ever read. Another recluse. Damn, we all had at least that much in common with Tommy L.

“No. Hell of a thing. Nate B and Paul from Boston were up north visiting Canadian Simon at some Podunk book festival. Those Canucks release a chapbook every other effing weekend it seems. Paul got hurt in a sledding accident, broke his wrist, but he’s okay. None of the Canadians in the sled were injured. Nate should’ve gone sledding instead of doing whatever *he* was doing… He contracted a mess of flukes, so now he’s getting de-wormed. Gonna be a while.”

“De-wormed?” I said. “He’s got worms? No shit?”

“That’s what flukes are, worms,” John said, so drunk he sounded sober again.

“No shit.” Michael made the Scout sign. “He’ll be crapping spaghetti for six weeks minimum.”

“Everybody knows you don’t drink the water up there,” I said.

“Mentally challenged *children* know it,” John said, taking a huge gulp of scotch. He was beginning to worry me.

“Maybe he got ’em directly from Simon,” I said.

“I’m careful to stick to booze north of Maine and I don’t kiss Canadians, ever,” Michael said, handing me Poe’s reins. He rose with the sudden grace of a mantis and fetched another round: brimming mugs of a honey mead I’d not tasted before, kind of earthy and coppery and acidic. It felt like fur sliding down my throat the wrong way. My eyes watered and the hairs in my nose bristled. “A rare cask,” he said when I asked what the fuck it was. “This is the only place in New York it can be found and the proprietor only serves it to certain customers on special occasions. I’m such a customer and a live reading by L is definitely a special occasion.”

“There’s an occultation of the moon in three hours,” John said.

“Our fair maiden in the pointy bustier mentioned it-the clincher,” Michael said.

“What in blue-blazes is so special about this reading, besides a kooky horror author showing his face in public for once instead of staying in with the cats?” I said, wiping my mouth. My head felt half staved-in. Another part of my brain was turning over possibilities like a kid flipping rocks with a stick and that part of me imagined the liquor was so rare, so exotic, Michael had paid for it with a Black AMX card he only used once a decade for this singular event, and the promise of services to be rendered later. Sexual services. This simply had to be the donkey show of gourmet hooch.

We regarded one another for a few moments, then he leaned closer, so his chin was level with the tabletop, and said, “Okay, look. Here’s the thing you rubes gotta know. Especially you, John-Boy. First, L won’t be showing his face at all. This is the new deal. He wears a costume. And he doesn’t speak.”

I laughed. “Right. He doesn’t speak.”

“He does not.”

“Oh, yeah,” John said. “Meant to tell you, the guy-”

Michael shushed him with a hard look. “No, no, don’t spoil the effect. He’ll see soon enough.”

“How does he orate if he won’t open his mouth?” I said, feeling very drunk and very petulant. Pretty soon they’d be telling me the asshole didn’t walk, but floated, as if on a palanquin toted by tiny elves in rhinestone jumpsuits. “Is it a pantomime like charades? An interpretive dance?”

“You’ll see,” Michael said and his eyes shimmered with the void I’d been noticing more and more all around me every day.

“Oh, man, it’s weird,” John said happily. Actually, he pitched his voice to a falsetto and held As You Know Bob in front of his face and pretended the puppet was adding its two-bits to the conversation.

“Yes, weird indeed,” Michael said, brandishing Poe in a similar manner. “You’ll see. You’ll see.”

“I do hope it’s something new,” I said, choosing to ignore their foolishness. “I keep the paperback of *Enemy of Man* in the bathroom. I’ve read the thing cover to cover twice.”

“Yes, oh yes, you are in luck, mon frere. L’s written a fresh book of essays, the companion volume to *Horror of Being*. No one other than his agent has even glimpsed the manuscript, but word is, it’s his masterpiece. Distils fifty-odd years of spleen in one raging spume of a satirical opus. It’s called *The Beautiful Thing That Awaits Us All*. A howling void of blackness, I imagine.” Michael said that with what I swore was a shiver of delight.

“It’s going to do for the antinatalists what Ron Hubbard did for the whack jobs waiting to be whisked to Yuggoth by the E.Ts,” John said.

Time and space dilated. So did the tavern and the heads of everyone inside. John and Michael were Thanksgiving parade floats tethered to chairs, smugly amused by my agnosticism toward all things L. I would see, I would see…

The next thing I recalled, we disembarked a subway in Brooklyn and were on the Dr. Seuss-angled steps of the Kremlin Bar that wound and wound

and rose and rose from the glittery icy darkness of New York winter's night to the velvety gloom of interiors that had, in their day, seen a lot of blood from the innards of poets, and booze, and bullet holes. Wood creaked beneath our shoes and brass gleamed here and there between folds of curtains, and the space around the bar was at capacity with an audience that buzzed rather than spoke. A living, breathing, telepathically communing Yin-Yang symbol. Intimate and impersonal as an Arctic starfield. Everything smelled of cigarette smoke and liquor and sweet, sweet perfume, and musk. The golden-green light tasted exactly like the last round of mystery mead we'd shared at the nameless tavern.

I'd been in the business a while, but though I recognized an occasional face such as a genre radio show host and a couple of editors and agents and a handful of local authors, most were strangers to me, seldom glimpsed wildlife that had crept from the forest depths to gather in the sacred glade and listen to Pan wheedle on his recorder by the dark of the moon. Literally the dark of the moon as a glance at my watch confirmed the eclipse John mentioned earlier would be in progress at any moment. I was an interloper, a blasphemer, and I half-expected a torrent of white blood corpuscles to gush forth and consume me as a hostile bacterium.

John and Michael shouldered a path to our reserved spot in a corner beneath a green-gold shaded dragon lamp. Its radiance made our hands glow against the tablecloth. Ellen D, famed editor and hostess of the event, came by and said hello and snapped our pictures and bought us another round in recognition of Jack's empty seat. I just poured the whiskey straight down my gullet, inured to its puny effects, and waited for whatever was coming, to come.

Tom L was not in evidence yet. His table of honor lay near the burnished wooden podium that had propped up many generations of crazed, catastrophically inebriated authors. The table was tenanted by two women, a blonde and a brunette in slinky sheath dresses, and a man in a slinky turtleneck. The man was handsome and clean-shaven the way one can only get with a straight razor. He reminded me of the actor Jan Michael Vincent during his youth before he socked some chick in the jaw for handing his girlfriend an eight ball at a party and tanked his career. I hadn't thought of Vincent in ages. I looked sidelong at the women some more and decided

they were way out of my league no matter how smashed I might endeavor to get. Both wore long velvet gloves and smoked cigarettes with hoity-toity cigarette holders. Neither wore a Dalmatian puppy stole, but that wouldn't have surprised me an iota.

"Jumping Josephat, that's W Lindblad!" John said, rattling his puppets in excitement.

"THE W Lindblad?" I said and rolled my eye.

"*Is that Jan Michael Vincent*?" a woman stage-whispered.

"*No way… OMG*! *The Puppet Master is in the house*! *Eeeee*!" I heard another woman exclaim.

"Sonofa… he flew in from Texas!" John said.

"Who wouldn't?" Michael said.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I said and wished mightily for another shot. *Drano* would've worked fine. The philosophy behind *HoB* was becoming more appealing by the second. Every necktie made me think of nooses and solid overhead fixtures.

"Lindblad isn't allowed in the UK," Michael said, lowering his voice like we were conspiring to knock over the joint. "Larceny rap. I don't know all the details, except that he got in hot water regarding some rare book that was up for grabs on the black market by way of Finland. Ah, those wily Finns. There was a bidding war going down in some rickety warehouse on the Thames and the Bobbies busted in and clapped the whole lot in irons. I guess twenty different consulates got frantic midnight calls. Lindblad's chummy with more Arab princes than the Bush family is, so getting the governor to pinch hit wasn't much of a trick. After much legal finessing, he was sprung on the promise he wouldn't show his face in England for a while. That, in a nutshell, is that."

"Must've been a hell of a lot of kinky nudity in ye tome," I said.

"Not really. It was the foreign edition of a US weird almanac or an occult guidebook. Rather innocuous, you ask me."

"He did a dime in Huntsville back in the late 1970s for gashing somebody with a broken wine bottle," John said with grave respect. "Lived on the mean streets, close to the bone. After getting his MFA, Lindblad was a

derelict for like fifteen years, or something. L befriended him, scraped him out of the gutter and gave him a purpose. Heard that from Lee T. Lee knows everybody in Texas. Got his ear to the ground."

"That sexy little twerp over there *did not* do hard time in Huntsville," I said trying to remain cool. "And he sure as shit didn't do hard time in Huntsville in the '70s. Too pretty and too young. Look at those soft, effeminate hands."

"Looks sorta hard to me," John said with an intrigued arch of his brow. Luckily, his powers didn't work on suave ex cons.

"Older than he appears," Michael said. "Oil of Olay is a miracle product."

I rubbed my temples and counted to ten. Thank god right then two things happened: Ellen saw my plight and brought me another triple of whatever was cheap at the bar, and Tom L drifted from a shrouded alcove and stood near his trio of groupies. Stood, mind you, not sat. "Whoa. Okay, that's a big dude." I drank up and plunked my empty on the table and gawked, just like everybody else.

"Behold the man," John said with or without irony; I was too bombed and too awestruck to make that call.

Larger than life was a cliché that fit this apparition all too well. L was conservatively six-feet-eight and broad as the proverbial barn. His bulk was encompassed in a heavy robe of crimson silk that pooled around and hid his presumably huge feet. He wore what I can only describe as an executioner's hood, also of crimson silk. No flesh was visible, not even the glint of his eyes through the hood slits. He stood motionless, a statue briefly animated, that had shambled unto view, and was now once again frozen in place. Something about his great size and stoicism, the inscrutability of the slits for his eyes and mouth, the blithe obliviousness of his entourage as they chatted amongst themselves, ignoring the giant entirely, scared the living bejeezus out of me, scared me on the level where the coyotes and the lizards and lonely rolling tumbleweeds held sway. A polar bear had beached itself upon an ice shelf with a herd of seals and the seals barked with joy, witless to their mortal danger.

I'd seen a picture of L once, a candid shot of him in a sport coat and a bad haircut, hunched in the act of stubbing a cigarette into an ashtray, grimacing at the camera as a thief with his hand in the till might. A grainy, fuzzy,

slightly out of focus picture, but clear enough and contextualized by the presence of other persons in the frame that it was utterly incongruous with the figure in crimson. The author in the photograph was of average size and build. No way no how the same individual as this behemoth holding court. I said as much to my comrades.

"He's changed over the years," Michael said. "It's rather uncanny, I admit."

"How can you be sure it's even him?"

"Who else would it be?"

I glanced at my empty glass and sighed. "Could be motherfucking Patrick Ewing in there for all we know."

The crowd was apparently sufficiently lubricated in preparation for the appointed moment. Ellen made her way to the podium where she efficiently introduced her guest with, "I present a man who needs no introduction. Please help me welcome Tom L to the Kremlin."

Applause followed, although none of the raucous hooting or whistling that usually accompanied the appearance of a famous and popular author, and the room subsided into a deep and reverential hush as the giant ascended the dais with a slow, measured shuffle and then loomed without flexing a muscle or uttering a word for at least a full minute.

This silence gathered weight. A current began to circulate through the room and the lamps dimmed further, and as they dimmed, L's already massive form seemed to absorb the light as a black hole bends and deforms everything in its well, and his silk costume shifted black and he was limned in white like the white-hot edge of a blade. Yes, my senses were swimming from enough scotch to paralyze a rhino. Nonetheless, that powerful forces were in play between performer and audience was unmistakable and unmistakably unnatural. Even though nothing was happening, *everything* was happening. I thought of the silvery moon going dark over the city, and behind Luna's shadow, Mars through Pluto falling into a radical symmetry, cogs linking and locking along axial darkness.

L's left sleeve rustled with inner life and slowly, horribly from its cavernous depths birthed a puppet. The thing that emerged was the girth of a toddler, soft and yellow as decayed bone, and glistening with a sheen as of jelly. It wore a skullcap, rusty bells, dark surcoat, a red cloak and red

leggings; a diminutive malformed jester, or a monk of Franciscan lore. Misshapen, malignant, diabolic-the hand puppet's countenance was remarkable in its jaundiced smoothness, its cockeye, and demented smirk. Its arms were overlong, its spindly hands and fingers mockeries of human proportion. The hands were restless. They writhed and gestured, both languid and spasmodic, gracile and palsied.

The puppet gazed at the audience, tilting its head and shuttering one off-kilter eye, then the other. It reached out with the deliberateness of a hunting spider extending a pedipalp to taste prey, and tapped the microphone. During none of the creature's articulations did the towering form of L so much as twitch. So dexterous were L's manipulations, the puppet appeared to operate wholly independent from the man himself.

The puppet said breathily, the male analogue to Marilyn Monroe prepping to sing *Happy Birthday, Mr. President*, "I am Mandibole." And, after a pause where it groaned like an asthmatic, "Tonight, I shall recite a story created by my benefactor, the incomparable L. It has never been told. It is a true story." The voice seemed to emanate directly from the puppet's twisted lips. "Imagine the heads of everyone at every table in this room disembodied and attached, like ripe fruit, to the branches of a tree in a field. A huge, leafless tree in a wide and grassless field. The field is black dirt and the tree is also dark, fleshy and warm, however it does not live so much as persist, suckling the life force from its own fiber, its own fruit, in essence a cannibal of itself.

"The hanging heads: your comrades, your neighbors, yourselves, do not speak, cannot speak, for their mouths and yours are crammed with bloody seeds. You and they hang from the black tree in the black field, this tableaux illuminated by interior flames from the heads, for the seeds glow with fire, swelling and frothing maggots of deathly light. You sway in the breeze like Jack O' Lanterns and cannot utter protest, or question your Maker, or petition your Accuser. You are muted by choking mouthfuls of gore. And this is Hell, my friends. It will continue and continue unto Eternity, until it becomes something worse. Something worse." It repeated *something worse* at least twenty times, imperceptibly lowering its voice until the words trailed off.

I observed this spectacle with profound unease. I felt as a man helplessly staked near a colony of fire ants might feel, flesh crawling in anticipation of the approaching swarm. A needlessly surreptitious glance around the room confirmed that every person was slack-jawed, faces shining in rapt concentration while their bodies faded to lumps within deepening shadow. John and Michael had completely forgotten my presence. They, along with everyone else at the Kremlin, were on some distant soundstage in Hell, hanging from the Tree of Anti-Life.

Certainly my overreaction was the result of mental depression and an admittedly tenuous grasp on reality. Being wasted on god knew how many brands of liquor was likely a contributing factor. This tempered my urge to beg forgiveness of John and Michael for doubting them, for sneering at the notion L was some evil messiah sent by the dark gods to spread a message of disharmony and dread. But only a little.

Mandibole said, “Now imagine the hours passing, the days, weeks, months… Imagine the flesh deliquescing from bone, hair peeling in strips. The blackbirds feasting on eyes, noses, tongues… But you see everything that happens, feel every exquisite inch of yourselves slithering down the craws of the flock…”

I rose and lurched to the bar, hand covering my good ear to block the persistent drone of Mandibole’s oration. The bartender didn’t meet my eye when I demanded a shot. He grabbed a fresh bottle of Johnnie Walker and shoved it at me. I cracked the seal and had a pull worthy of Lee Van Cleef and Lee Marvin combined, and listed against the rail, gasping for breath, and for a few moments this distracted me from whatever malevolent shit the puppet was spouting.

“Hey there, sailor,” the blonde from L’s table said, sliding next to me so her red lips were near my neck, the heat off her tongue tracing my skin in collaboration with the alcohol igniting my veins. Her body lotion was lilac and water. She laid her hand on my thigh and didn’t exactly smile, but made an expression something like one. “Buy a girl a drink?” She took the bottle and sipped, delicate and ladylike. Her un-smile widened. “You seem sad. It’s because you’re alone.”

“I’m with friends,” I said, conscious of the thickness of my voice, wondering if its intrusion upon the scene would cause the crowd to turn on me, to hiss at me for silence. No one seemed to notice; they were a roomful of wax dummies glued into their seats, heads fused, gazes fixed upon the podium. Only the brunette and the man in the turtleneck were watching us. Both of them were doing the un-smiling thing.

“Don’t worry about these… people,” the blonde said, her breath hot and sweet with the Johnnie Walker. “We’re *all* all alone in the world.” She wasn’t a true blonde-her roots showed dark where the peroxide ran thin.

“Of course we are. That’s why I’m sad. Man alive, I carried a torch for Julie Andrews. You’re more vulpine, but I’m not picky.”

“It’s a different thing entirely. Sun and moon. Heaven and Hell.” Her fingers roamed my thigh as she talked. Strange though, rather than erotic; jittery and unsynchronized as Mandibole’s hand movements or Poe moonwalking as Michael pulled its strings.

I stuck out my hand, although the gesture seemed superfluous at this point. “I’m-”

“We know who you are, Mr. B.”

“We?”

“Certainly. You’re recognizable enough if one squints just right.”

“What’s your name, baby?”

“I’m W Lindblad. Whom else?” She swept her fingers perilously near my crotch, then tweaked my nose, leaned back and laughed coldly. Over her shoulder, the man in the turtleneck gesticulated and pantomimed the blonde’s motions and behind him Mandibole exaggerated a pantomime of Mr. Turtleneck. Elsewhere, Pluto groaned and rolled off its axis.

“I fucking knew it would be something like this.” I had to chuckle, though. The last time a beautiful woman approached me at a bar she’d bought me a scotch and then asked if I’d found Jesus. JC was still missing, apparently. “Of all the poor schmucks in this joint, you had to pick on me?”

“You’re the only one rude enough to interrupt this momentous performance, this ritual that will open the way and bridge the gulf between

new stars and old ones.” She laughed a dog’s laugh without changing expression.

“Oh, okay. Amazing work with that puppet. I assume it’s one of yours.”

“You refer to puppets as *it.* Refreshing. Most people say he or she.”

“No sense in imbuing inanimate objects with sexual characteristics, even in jest.”

“Says a world about you. In this case *it* is more correct than you could possibly conceive. The precise term, in fact. None other would do. However, Mandibole is no invention of mine. *It* comes from elsewhere. It’s a traveler. A visitor.”

In the background, Mandibole said, “*Something worse, something worse, something worse,*“ and kept chanting it and chanting it. Several of the listeners joined in and soon it was like a church revival meeting with the parishioners chorusing the right reverend’s punch lines. All of the lights had died except for the one hanging directly over the podium. Beyond the first row, all was darkness. The blonde and I sat, bumping knees, in darkness too.

The blonde’s face blended into the ink. Her eyes glinted red though, seeming to hang in blank space. “Why the ring? She’s gone gone gone.”

I didn’t understand for a moment, then reached instinctively for my throat where I kept my wedding ring on a chain under my collar. The ring was an empty gesture, not that acknowledging this changed anything, and so the emptiness conquered all. I couldn’t decide how to feel, so I tittered uneasily. “Nice. Are you a cold reader? Do divinations for old biddies and their toy poodles in Manhattan?”

“I like Rick James and long walks on the beach. Maybe I’m too forward. My secret weakness. I read minds as a party trick. Free of charge. So, if you had to guess, why do you think your woman left you?”

“Leave me? Ha! She kicked my ass to the curb.”

“Why do you suppose this sad thing has occurred?”

“Why is the center of the universe as soft as a tootsie pop undulating with nuclear sludge serenaded by an orchestra of idiot flautists playing *Hail to the Chief*?”

“Fair enough,” she said.

“Wanna get out of here?” I said.

Her red eyes burned like coals. “A minute ago you were thinking of our Lord & Savior. *There’s* a fascinating case.”

“Is this a long story? Because-”

“Silence, fool. That Christ was a puppet, strings played by a master in the gallery of stars, is the kind of truth that would get you burned in earlier days. The parallel between God and Gepetto, Christ and Pinocchio, surely an absurdist’s delight. I think the supernatural element is bunk and lazy storytelling to boot. That the holy carpenter was only a simple lunatic with delusions of grandeur makes his fate all the more grisly, don’t you agree? His suffering was the ultimate expression of the form. Torturers long ago discovered that pleasure and pain are indistinguishable after a certain point. Jesus ejaculated as the thorns dug in and the spearhead stabbed, and he waited in vain for his imaginary father. Suicide is a sin, so they say. Unless you’re a martyr, then green light go. Doesn’t have to be hard, even though it’s harder for some. Some have a talent for destruction. I swallowed seventy sleeping pills and half a magnum of raspberry champagne on prom night. Wow, my mascara was a mess. The homecoming queen was my sister, if you can believe. She snuffed it right with a bag of bleach over her face on New Year’s Eve, 2001. Bitch was better at everything.”

I froze, dreams of a semi-anonymous fare-thee-well blow job in the bathroom across the hall going down like the Titanic, so to speak, and considered the possibility that besides obvious derangement, the woman might be physically dangerous to me, especially in my current helpless state. The scene had taken on the tones of the anaconda from *The Jungle Book* cartoon mesmerizing that sap Mowgli with its whirly eyes and thespian lisp: *trust in me!* It seemed wiser to keep my trap shut and grunt noncommittally, which is what I did.

She said, “But he’s beyond all this and he finally knows. He’s a real boy now.”

“What *does* Jesus know? The obvious answer would be everything, at the Right Hand of God and such.”

“He’s seen the beautiful thing that awaits us all. Waiting at the bottom of the hole beneath everything.”

“If you’re saying shit rolls downhill, I have to concur.” I turned away and she grabbed my wrist. Her flesh was icy beneath the gloves. I witnessed Christ broken upon the cross. The sky burned. Christ’s battered face was my own. The sky dimmed to starless black and filled his eyes with its void. “Jesus!” I said and blinked rapidly and flinched from the woman, convinced she’d somehow projected this image into my brain.

Mandibole cried, “Death is the aperture, the cathode into truth, the beginning! The beginning, my sweet ones. More fearsome words were never spoken. A more vile threat has never been uttered. Yes, there are worse things, worse things, and death is not among them.”

The blonde’s grip tightened and tightened. Oh, yeah, an anaconda, all right. “That’s a goo-ood boy,” she said and her many teeth glinted as her eyes glinted. Not a serpent, but a monstrous rat with tabby tom under her claw and pleased as punch. Good ol’ Punch. Or, maybe just maybe it was Judy who’d become a real girl. “I can see that you’ve seen. Infinite dark, infinite cold, infinite sleep. Much better than the alternative-infinite existence as a disembodied spirit. Awareness for eternity. All you have to do is let go. Let Mandibole eat your consciousness. Then, trot back to your little hotel room and go on permanent vacation.”

“My choice is non-being via having my mind dissolved or be a screaming head for eternity? What the fuck happened to door number three?” I said.

“Be glad of the choice. Most don’t receive one. Talk to L after the gig. He can help you get your mind right for the voyage into nothing. Don’t quit your quest a few miles from home. Don’t linger like HP and die of a tumor, last days spent wasting away on tins of cat food and the indifference of the universe. Don’t end it foaming and raving in a ditch as dear Edgar did. Who’d come to your grave with a flower and a glass of brandy every winter to mark your sad demise? You don’t rate, I’m afraid.”

Something cold and hard pressed against my temple and across the way, Mandibole, haloed in a shaft of hellish angelic light, the far wandering ice-light of devil stars, swiveled and stared into the gloom directly at me, into me, and winked, and an abyss was revealed.

“Oh, what is this bullshit again?” A bulb in the liquor case behind the bar blinked to life as a diving bell surfacing from the deeps, and worldfamous publisher GVG appeared and pried the bottle from the woman’s hand where she’d stuck it to my head. “Go tell Tom I don’t care how many Horror Writer’s Guild Awards he’s got rusting on his mantle. I still don’t regret not publishing that crap.” He smacked her sequin-studded ass and shooed her away, and she retreated to her friends with a hiss and a glare.

GVG owned a venerable science fiction magazine and had given me my first pro sale. I hadn’t seen him since the previous year’s World Fantasy Convention.

“Thanks,” I said, slumping with sudden weariness. “Quite a scene. One minute I’m getting lucky, the next I don’t even know what.”

“You weren’t getting lucky, farm boy. In New York City we call that shit getting unlucky. Take a hedge trimmer to that beard and you might not scare away all the nice girls. Or, on second thought, write something remotely commercial for once. Yeah, try that second thing.”

“The girlies like a man with folding green,” I said.

“Ain’t that the truth, my friend.” He smiled sadly and looked me in the eye. “The secret is chicks don’t dig seldom-read hosers like Mark S. So don’t be that guy. A little less of your Henry James lovin’-grampa’s favorite toilet reading and a bit more twenty-first century. Come into the light.”

I didn’t have the heart to crack wise, or to confess that it was way too late for a career-defining shift. We listened as Mandibole dispassionately described skulls stripped to bloody bone kicked around the equivalent of an Elysian soccer field while the gods cheered and diddled each other in the grandstands. But for me the spell was broken. I said, “Not giving Tommy boy the spring cover, huh?”

GVG shrugged and adjusted his Buddy Holly glasses. “I’m immune to the charms of pseudo philosophizing horror writers and their vampire bride entourages. Wanna see horror, come see what my three year old and a bottle of rubber cement did to the cat and a pile of slush manuscripts in my living room. Gonna have to bite the bullet and go electric one of these days. Just remember something, okay? Dunno what that spooky chick told you, what you’ve got planned, but the only thing that changes when you check out is

that nothing ever changes again. It’s no different on the other side. No different at all.” With that, he squeezed my shoulder and darted back into the shadows, good deed for the evening accomplished.

“The faithful shall be eaten first as a reward. The non believers, the scoffers, the faithless, shall be eaten last, or not at all. As for you, my sweets, your fate is this-“ Mandibole ceased speaking midsentence and became inert. As slowly as it had appeared, its body now receded into L’s sleeve and the sleeve collapsed upon the brief, discomfiting jangle of rusty bells, an echo of Poe and a cask of Amontillado and the masonry of ancestral catacombs, a whiff of moldy death. The lights brightened and the audience awakened, table by table, from its daze and clapped with sustained appreciation. My bottle was damn near empty and I snatched it and sidled away before the bartender remembered to charge me. One for the road to Eldorado.

“Okay, you keep an eye on our buddy here-I’m going in,” John said as I returned to our spot. He smoothed what remained of his hair, scooped up As You Know Bob and Poe, and charged off to meet his destiny.

L had expeditiously-for such a hulking man-retreated behind the beaded curtain of his alcove. A candle or lantern flickered murkily on the other side. A conga line quickly formed-at least a dozen starry-eyed supplicants bearing books, tattered magazines from the glory days of commercial horror lit, and in John’s case, a pair of cheap marionettes swiped from his kid.

“Good luck, pal,” I said to myself as Michael lolled in his seat, drooling and muttering imprecations in Pig Latin, far beyond paying John’s departure or my grousing any heed. I killed the bottle and left it crossways among the cascade of empty glasses and made for the stairwell, which proved jammed with a secondary crowd of night owls who knew nothing of the reading we’d just survived, or the beautiful thing that W Lindblad swore awaited us all, but were instead standing on line for the midnight jazz club upstairs to throw open its doors. How nice for them to be them and not us!

No one stepped aside, kissy-faces too enamored with one another, too intoxicated by their own adorableness, each of them locked elbow and flank in a swanky retro mass, as I pushed my way through the gauntlet of cocktail dresses, feathery boas and pinstripe suits and white fedoras. The people

smelled pretty, and all I could see were their skulls dangling in Hell. Fuck you, Tommy L, fuck you and your little hand puppet too!

Freezing rain tick-tacked on the sidewalk awning, the roofs of parked cars. I tightened the collar of my overcoat and hunched in the stairwell, sharing the smoke of a drunk woman balanced on high heels as she waved a cigarette and cackled into her cell phone. The air was just chilly enough to slice through the fog and remind me of how much alcohol I'd guzzled over the past few hours, and for the first time since I'd walked into the Kremlin I visualized the gun waiting for me in the dresser drawer, back at the hotel. The psycho blonde had accused me of loneliness, but that wasn't quite right. Loneliness didn't justify self-destruction. Despair and grief, self-loathing and self-recrimination, failure and desertion… *those* were justifications.

Yet, the whole suicide plan sounded lame in the frigid glare of the lamps along the boulevard; a piker's lament to avoid paying the tab. Robert Service once said dying is easy, it's the keeping on living that's hard, and of course the poet was on the money, as poets usually are when it comes to smugly self-evident affirmations. I planned to blast a hole through my skull less because of insurmountable heartache, but more because I'd become too weak and too chickenshit to carry the cross one more goddamned bloody step. The marbles were going into the bag and I was headed home, exactly like any selfish, self-indulgent fifth grade snot was wont to do when confronted with one losing throw too many.

I'd almost decided to ask the woman screeching into her phone for a cigarette despite the fact I wasn't a smoker when John and Michael burst through the doors yelling and flailing their arms. I couldn't understand a word-a string of guttural yips and clicks and snarls. They were men with hyena heads.

That did the trick. I leaned over the rail and vomited up the dark heart of the cosmos.

Michael went his way, barking at slow-cruising taxis that refused to stop while John and I hustled and caught the last train out of the city. Our car

was empty. A throng of night-shift workers pressed on at one lonely stop, seemed to take our measure and with exchanges of warning looks moved on to the next car. Same deal with the squad of off-duty Army grunts a few minutes later.

John and I didn't say much. His face resembled forty miles of bad road, as a country philosopher might say; hair disheveled and matted, eyes bulbous and streaked red, nose a bloody carnation; the genteel professor's bark stripped to reveal a carving: the primitive beast in the mouth of his cave. His puppets were in worse shape. Or puppet. He'd come from the Kremlin with Poe dangling from his fist, As You Know Bob conspicuously absent. Missing in action, as it were.

The train jarred as it traveled the rails, and my teeth clicked and the lights threatened to extinguish every few seconds, and Poe's wooden body lay flopped negligently across the worn spot on John's knee. The puppet's head knocked rhythmically against the metal seat divider. Something in John's demeanor made me loath to broach the subject, and thus I satisfied my deepening curiosity with those sidelong glances we men often shoot at daring cleavage or the dude standing at the next urinal, but it was Poe that attracted my attention. Poe's visage had warped the way wood and plastic do when exposed to melting heat. One eye was lost in slag; the other had crept toward the hairline. No longer fashionably soulful, that eye-now an oblong black marble, or an overlarge pit of a rotten piece of fruit.

I recalled Mandibole's loving and loveless description of bloody seeds and thought that yes, blood doth turn black. Poe's eye was the seed of corruption coagulated in a membrane of evil. It wasn't watching me, though my poor abused mind would've easily swallowed the premise like I'd swallowed so much scotch. Poe wasn't watching anything; whatever energy might've been imprinted upon it from kindliness and love, was gone. My recognition that the little puppet had been perverted into a dead, alien husk, and that neither Clara's doting joy nor John's paternal benevolence had done fuckall to prevent such an ominous transmogrification, caused my rebellious innards to gurgle and shift. I dared not dwell on As You Know Bob's fate.

That steady tap-tappity-tapping of Poe's skull against metal was too much in the end. I said, "Did you get his autograph?"

“L doesn’t sign autographs anymore.”

“Doesn’t speak, doesn’t sign books, what does he do?” I said, trying for a laugh, a smirk, anything remotely human, and while I waited a string of ghostly lights of an electrical substation floated past the window, trailing into oblivion.

John smiled, a wide, carnivorous yawn of jaws and teeth. “It was… good. He wants what’s best. What’s best. We’re coming out of the cave. Got to, can’t go on like this. Got to come out of the dark.”

In my years with John, drunk, sober, and realms between those antipodes, his tone was a new one, his slur a thing unfamiliar as something dredged onto the beach from the deep sea. Tonight had been a night of such unwelcome curiosities, and considering my circumstances, perhaps a punctuating spike in the bizarre was appropriate, my karma if karma existed, if the universe kept tabs in its own insensate fashion, mindless as gravity.

We disembarked at the final station and slouched past dim and silent kiosks through frosty glass doors into a gathering storm. John paused at a trash bin and whispered to Poe, then he sneered and dropped the puppet into the trash and walked on without a backward glance. I called out a feeble goodbye that John returned with a perfunctory wave, then he was in his car, its door *thunking* shut. I started my own rental and drove to the hotel near the Newburgh Airport where the night man had on a soccer game and was relaxing with a big stack of Jack Chick pamphlets. I bought a soda from the machine in the hall because my tongue was swollen and leathery.

Man, it was a real let down.

I peeled some bills off the dwindling roll and left them on the coffee table for the maid, hoping she’d get them after the cops and the medics were done. I sat on the edge of the unmussed bed in that sterile, neat-as-a-pin, one-hundred-and-twenty-dollar-a-night hotel room. It began to snow and flakes piled against the window. The television was broadcasting nonsense; chains of American flags, sun and moon sliding atop one another to make black rings, my wife’s face in the faces of enemies and strangers, a Nazi aiming his rifle at another man’s back, tribal hunters racing across a moor, snarls done in red ocher, Sufis keening in a temple, my wife again and

again, and Mandibole cutting through it all, speaking in tongues except for one clear strain in the cacophony: clear as a bell Michael intoning through the creature's mouth that nothing was ever easy, not this easy, and that nothing was ever clean, this wouldn't be clean, the Eternal Footman had the check ready, no shirking the bill, no escape. This couldn't end like this because nothing ever really ended, matter simply deformed, that's what the Purple People Eaters wanted to tell us, why they'd sent a representative across the spoiled Milky Way to spread the word.

The blonde laughed at me as her eyes slid around most frightfully and my wife's head superimposed and shimmered there, rippling with static, frozen in time.

I picked up the gun and I thought about my dogs that she kept in the divorce, and I thought of her as she was when we met, when she told me that it was over, and that disembodied voice replayed in my ear, promising that it would never be over, and I wished I'd run after John, wished that I'd rescued Poe from the trashcan grave and maybe I should put the gun down and get into the car and go do just that, but in this universe I'd already squeezed the trigger.

GVG and Michael were right. L and his demon spokes-puppet were right-nothing's different, nothing changes. Lasts longer, though.

a strange form of life

This version taken from *Dark Faith: Invocations*, August 2012
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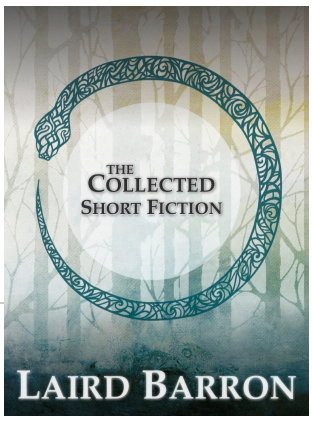

Wind screamed along the rooftops of the prison, scattering night birds and bats.

Station 3 lay near the edge of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. The prison was huge and decrepit. Built in the 1930s, allegedly atop Indian burial grounds, there'd been murders and fires, rapes and riots, and haunting aplenty, so much so that even the diocese loathed sending in clergy to take confessions or spread the faith. The aura of corruption emanating from the prison's very walls was too much and the word from Rome was fuck it, more or less.

Now, despite the state's perennial problem with overcrowding at correctional facilities, the vast rusting blight sat mostly uninhabited, a high plains Alcatraz. Two hundred inmates and a skeleton crew of guards and support staff called a wing of the prison and the surrounding miles of prairie home. Scuttlebutt had it that come next year's election, the complex would be bulldozed and the land sectioned into commercial office space, staff and occupants displaced to the Devil knew where. The Devil. Everyone at Station 3 thought about Old Poger quite often, for one reason or another.

The guard and the convict went into a remote section, long shut down and abandoned, and fucked, exactly as they had done twice a week for the past three months since the convict transferred in from Walla Walla. Usually they rendezvoused in the library after hours, or the machine shop. Tonight, the convict had insisted on more privacy, claimed he had something important to share. The guard humored the lad; he didn't have much else to do.

Here the darkness was almost complete except for the distant glow of a lamp at the intersection. Water dripped from corroded pipes that carried the moans of the wind. Rats scuttled among fallen masonry. A heavy odor of

dankness and rot clung to concrete and stone and the impression was that the lovers had strayed from the workings of man into a deep cavern of the earth.

The convict gripped the bars of the defunct block gate, his stance wide. The old guard thrust so forcefully the convict's forehead bounced against the steel. The convict always chatted while the guard worked, though his nervousness seemed acute. The kid was in the middle of narrating the story of his life, the chapter about how he almost got away. —We took down the bank at the end of the shift, y'know. Coulda made a clean getaway, except for some cops who ran along the sidewalk after us. Russ crashed the car in a field. I think one of the pigs shot our tire. We booked outta the car, every man for himself. I stuffed money into my pockets and down my pants and beat feet.

The guard rolled his eyes and snorted. His breathing was heavy as a horse that'd been flogged down the home stretch; sparks whirled as his brain began to ignite. He gripped the convict's hips and made a final, agonized lunge and had a vision of the con's head getting wedged between the bars. That would be tricky to explain to the other screws, although Whitey and Reggie would just laugh. The guard wiped himself and zipped his fly. He slumped against the arch of the tunnel and lit a cigarette. The sharp flame spun shadows across the walls, momentarily revealing blocks of satanic graffiti and water stains curdled with mold. Then he flipped the lighter shut and brought back the dark. He smoked, free hand resting on his gut, which sagged over his belt like a cannonball. Twenty-seven years on the job had given him a drinking problem, a bad back, flat feet, flattened nose, three missing teeth, and contempt for humanity, himself included. Nonetheless, as he gasped for air to smoke his cigarette, another vice picked up in the line of duty, a sense of grudging affection for the convict mellowed his habitual resentment toward the universe.

The kid became quiet, sort of hanging with his arms stuck through the bars, pants around his ankles. He wasn't really a kid, probably in his late twenties, the bloom off the rose and all that, but still taut and smooth and irrepressible. His skin gleamed in the darkness. The silence didn't last. Without glancing backward, he said, —I hauled ass through the field and come to a bumpy old road. Getting set to cross it when a car rolls by. Real

slow. Cruisin' like a shark. Dunno why, but something was off about it. Spooked me bad. I had a premonition. An omen. Whatever you wanna call it. Goose run over my grave.

—Fix your britches and I'll give you a smoke, the guard said.

The convict pulled up his pants. He accepted a cigarette and let it dangle from the corner of his mouth, striking a pose like a tough from *West Side Story*. He smirked and winked until the guard's composure cracked and he chuckled. The convict said, —Then the dude riding shotgun looked back at me. I was so freaked, man. I ran into the tall grass and hid for like, six hours. Damned dogs found me. I got a scar from the hole the fucker tore in my belly.

—A guy spots you in the ditch and that scares you?

—I was already scared. That made it worse. That was the icing, chief.

—You lost me.

—It was dark as a well-digger's asshole. *No way* he could see me hidin' in the Tooley weeds.

—But he *did*. Looked right at you.

—Like he could see in the dark. Stared into my soul.

Wind moaned somewhere deeper in the tunnel. The guard was surprised to feel the hairs on his arm prickle. He imagined the kid crouched in that country ditch, body hidden, face camouflaged in dirt and grease, behind a lattice of grass and leaves. Then the car, long and sleek, dome light on so the driver and passenger were illuminated like figures in a shadowbox. The figures were wrong, though. Too large for the compartment, oversized and vaguely monstrous as caricatures in a fairytale book, or misshapen puppets in some horror show. He took another drag and expelled the bad spirits to float among their fellows in the gallery beyond the wall of bars.

—That's not all, neither. There's more, the convict said.

Of course there was more. The guard frowned. Instinct warned him to make the kid shut his trap. Some things weren't meant to be spoken aloud and the pucker of his balls suggested that this was such a one. Any inclination to heed this primal instinct had been burned out by his recent

exertions and he simply glanced into the metaphorical abyss and took another long drag on the cigarette. —Tell it, punk.

The convict pouted. —Hey. I'm no punk. I ain't no bitch.

—Sorry, the guard said. And he was sorry; a little. It felt like the first crack in the back of a shelf of Antarctic ice.

—Be nice to me. Be nice to me, man.

—See, there's your problem. Appealing to the Man. He's not nice. Shut up or I'll beat you with my Billy club.

—What, again? But, fine. I'm not gonna tell you why I was scared shitless. You blew it. Blew your chance.

—Blew my chance? Like you can stop your gob for five seconds. I hang around long enough, I'll hear all about your tale of woe from the cradle onward, want to or not.

—No, you blew it and it was a good story, too.

—Come on, kid. I've been on the job since Hoover was trying on his mama's heels. I heard every story there is. The guard was in conflict. Part of him really wanted to hear that story the way one is compelled to peel the scab from an itchy wound. The other part of him knew better. —Want another cig? Don't be mad. I brought you some coffee, too. Two baggies of Colombian dark. Coffee was the gold standard in prison. He took the younger man's hand in his own scarred paw. He kissed the convict's fingers and sighed. —Go ahead. What else happened? You figure out who those guys in the car were?

The convict sulked for several moments. He relented and let the guard give him another cigarette. He smoked, and in the black and blue haze, he seemed far too young and fragile for this prison. —They were demons. The Great Dark's bootlickin' servants on the loose in the world. My uncle was a minister. He showed us how to recognize 'em when we were kids. Ain't hard if you got the knack. The flesh of humanity don't fit quite right.

—You bring the hellfire *and* the brimstone, huh, boy? Doesn't seem Christian, knocking off banks, blasting women and children and folks. The guard smiled bitterly. Oh, how they all gave it up for the Lord once that

steel gate clanged shut. Practising their choirboy arpeggios for the day they'd sing before a parole board.

—*My uncle* was a minister. Mom and Pop weren't anything special. Went to church on Easter for the potluck. And I never shot anybody. That was Russ smoked the girl in the bank. He's a stone-cold motherfucker.

—You find Jesus here in the pen? Get right with the Sky Warden?

—I don't believe in God.

—Don't believe in God. Don't—believe—in—God. Demons, though. Demons you can get behind as a concept.

—Every culture's got its demons, the convict said. —Monsters don't need no brand of religion to do what they do. Christians believe in possession. Indians got skin walkers. People from other places call 'em whatever, but I expect they're all the same.

—Well, hell, that makes sense, the guard said. —Good for you, sonny. You've got depth. A country philosopher. Too bad you never blasted anybody, though. Kinda turned me on when I thought you was dangerous. A young Charlie Bronson. Mm, mm, mm. He extended his hand through the gloom and pinched the convict's baby-smooth cheek. —Enjoy it while it lasts. I was a lean mean screwing machine in my heyday. The spitting image of Lee Van Cleef is what all the girlies said.

—You look mean enough.

—I *am* mean enough.

—And you got his beady eyes.

—But not the fame, money, or cars to go along with them, more is the pity.

—You got the big ol' ring of keys, though. Man with the keys got everything.

The guard didn't answer. He squinted and cocked his head, sure he'd heard something down the ruined tunnel; a noise, distinct from the wind, that lasted only a moment, then subsided, and mutated in his consciousness, echoed there just as an aftershock of brilliance imprints upon the inner eyelid. He unholstered the heavy Maglite and clicked the rubber toggle. The bulb brightened and died. Click, click, click.

There were rats in the walls, armies of them. Legions of cockroaches, too. The guard didn't think rats accounted for the new sound. Gone now, lost in the regular creaks and groans and whistles. He should've been gone by now, too, gone from the prison, retired, sipping rum and coke on a beach while the steel drums played. He'd come to the profession late and now he had a sneaking hunch it was *too* late. That thought usually visited him for an instant upon waking prior to his morning shift, weighing upon his chest, a succubus straight from images of hell in a medieval tapestry. But it was here now, wasn't it? He glanced toward the intersection where the far-off light dimmed slightly.

—Lemme ask you something, the convict said.

—All right.

—I can't stay here.

—That a question? The guard tried smacking the Maglite with his cupped palm. Nothing, and more nothing. He whistled through his teeth just as his father had done when nervous. Whistling past the graveyard, the old-timers called it.

—No, man. What I mean is, I can't stay here at the Station no more. I ain't safe.

—Who is?

—I been thinking of making a run at the wall. The convict wiggled two fingers, pantomiming legs on the move.

Me, too, the guard thought, and chuckled to mask a sob. He said, —Dawson's boys will cut you down before you get ten yards. They enjoy snuffing cons. A few years ago, some of them, the real twisted fellers, ran a game. A con on the cons, you'd say. They'd pretend to be on the take, conspire with the desperate cons about breaking out for a little payoff. Agreed to look the other way when the cons snuck by with their knotted bed sheets, or what-have-you. Then, when the poor suckers made a move… Pow! A thirty-aught-six hollow point through the back of the skull and the Dobermans ripping apart the carcass. Bastards would sit around and laugh their asses off. Word got around, so there haven't been any turkey shoots lately. Don't think about it. I like you, boy.

—You got it right; nobody's safe in the Station. Bad juju, chief. Peeps are getting weird. Fucked in the brain. They was actin' the same way in Walla Walla. The shit is spreading. Now it's here. It's among us.

The guard nodded, one eye still focused on the shadows. It wasn't the entire staff… nonetheless, some of the screws *were* behaving oddly. Odder than usual, at least. Secret conversations held in whispers and knowing smirks, the humming of off-key ditties, the cracking of knuckles. He'd seen Big Dan twitching like a headless chicken, in the locker room that very afternoon. Three or four seconds of Grand Mal action. Big Dan snapped out of it and smiled a creepy, evil smile and went down to the yard and beat the Harris brothers to a pulp over a trifle. And yesterday, Harley Koschek had walked right into the cafeteria wall, full speed, and busted his nose. The crazy sonofabitch had tilted his head back and gulped all the gushing blood. Nobody said anything, not a fucking thing, and so the guard had concentrated upon his ham on rye, and chewed, and thought dark thoughts.

The convict kept talking, naturally. —Maybe something in the water. Man, I read about a radioactive cloud movin' underground from Hanford toward the Columbia. One teaspoon of that shit will light up the river and kill a half million whitebread assholes in the 'burbs.

—We're upstream. Snug as bugs in a rug.

—I know. What I'm sayin' is, people are off their feed. Last few nights, those Mexicans in the next cell been whisperin'. Don't make no kinda sense, neither. Sergeant Sheckley come down and visited them. Psss, psss, psss! Just whisperin'. Afterward, he stood by my door for ten minutes. Didn't say nothin'. Stared at me and smiled. Man, last time I saw a grin like that, it was cut into a pumpkin.

—Maybe he's one of those demons your uncle told you about.

—Somethin' was livin' in Sheckley's eyes. Not *him*, though. He was long gone.

—This was the second part of your story, huh? You bring me here to make a dire prediction? The Aztec calendar roll over a year early? Tonight is the last night on Earth? Mankind going out with a whimper?

—There's a whatchamacallit… an eclipse…

—A lunar eclipse. I forgot, yeah. What time is that happening? We wouldn't see anything even if we could go outside in the yard. Too much cloud cover.

—Can I bum another smoke?

The guard lit his last two cigarettes, briefly extending the lighter between the bars, a Dark Ages explorer trying to survey the depths of a strange cave, in vain. The darkness shrank a few inches, but that was all. The metal at the lighter's crown heated and blackened and the flame doubled and licked his thumbnail. The yellow core transfixed him.

He lived three miles down the road in a doublewide in a shabby court. The court was owned by his aunt on his mother's side, and she had cut him a deal. He ate microwave dinners, except for Friday nights down at the Rattler Saloon. Those nights, he bought a T-bone steak and a pitcher of draft and watched the game on the plasma, hanging over the bar and pretended to give a shit. He usually slept on an antique La-Z-Boy by the dying light of a box television. His dog, a Boerboel named Zilla, had passed away the week before Christmas last year, so now he talked to himself while watching Masterpiece Theater presentations of Agatha Christie mysteries, muttered his hypotheses regarding whodunit into empty air. None of the guys knew he watched MPT and Nova, and he was careful not to let on. Crassness and insensitivity were armor and shield at the Station. More importantly, these traits were camouflage. They thought he brutalized the inmates he took a shine to, that he coerced his lovers. Romance, sentimentality, those were traits his colleagues would sneer at. Contempt was dangerous at the Station.

The guard blinked and snapped the lighter shut. He said, —I watched a special about ants on Nova the other night. Well, I saw two things, related though. One on the ants, these mega-colonies that are spreading all over the planet. Trillions upon trillions of them. Foreign tribes don't make war when they meet. Scientists brought a few over from a colony in Japan and exposed them to a colony that's taking over California. The ants shook pincers, made love, assimilated. The white-coats didn't say it in so many words, but the bugs are planning something. Probably a *coup d'etat*.

—Saw the movie, the convict said, taking a disaffected drag on his cigarette. —When I was a kid. Goddamn gigantic ants taking over the

Earth. In black and white. I hear lotsa bad shit about ants on the news. A lady at an old folks home in Arizona got eaten alive by a bunch a red fire ants. She had dementia and some other stuff and couldn't move. Ants came tricklin' through a hole in the wall. Started with her eyes and nose, I guess. True story.

—Jesus H., the guard said. He imagined the old lady as a husk wrapped in flannel, and the black train of ants traveling through the wall and across the shiny floor of a night desert. The moon clouded and blackened as the metal of his lighter had clouded and blackened. The music of the stars was a faint shriek. —The other story on Nova was about zombie ants.

—What the fuck? Zombie ants. That's some crazy shit.

—There's a prehistoric fungus that was recently discovered in the jungle. Very rare. It releases spores that infect ants. Consumes them from the inside and controls their behavior. Tries to send them back to the main colony to spread the joy. When the victims die, tendrils sprout from their corpses and eject more spores. The pictures are gruesome. Sure, it's just ants, but holy shit.

The convict chuckled and his voice changed, became softer, androgynous. —Oh, I saw that episode, too. Frightfully macabre, how the fungus causes its prey species to fruit. That's what it's called, the horror of the ants bursting apart with fungal blooms. Fruiting. Cue the jokes. Or not. The convict tossed his cigarette butt away in a trail of tiny sparks. He straightened and drew himself to intimidating height with a prolonged crackle of his spine. —It's called Cordyceps and it doesn't devour ants exclusively. There are thousands of variations on the progenitor, each adapting to a diet of a specific species. I'm here to tell you that Cordyceps is a relatively new organism, an adolescent scion. The mother genus is much older. Much older and, as of these past months, much more aggressive.

The guard smiled reflexively and turned his head slightly away before lurching forward and smashing the convict across the jaw with the Maglite. The flashlight made an odd, hollow clink, and its plastic bits flew apart as its metal crumpled, and the guard's arm went dead, as if he'd struck a cement pillar. The convict slapped the broken weapon away and pushed him

onto the damp floor as one might flatten a toddler. The guard lay in an inverted crucifix position, and he saw the light at the intersection go out. Then he saw nothing but the blackness that encased the world.

The convict said, —There, there, lover. You're all right. You're with me. I won't let the bogeymen get you.

—You *are* the bogeyman, the guard said.

—I'm a pet. We're all pets, servitors of the gods. I was infected that night in the field. That's why the powers-that-be transferred me and a few of my fellow initiates here. As you said, to spread the joy to the entire colony. The insane part of this? You aren't even talking to me. I retrograded nine nights ago. You've been copulating with a fruiting corpse these past several trysts. This conversation is stimulated by pheromones that render prey compliant through hallucination. The geography cone squirts something similar at fish. The fish enters quasi-paralysis, swims in place, confused and disoriented. Then the cone slides over and does its dirty business.

—I'm talking to myself. I'm talking to myself. I'm talking to myself.

—No, you're speaking to the gloriously transmogrified hulk of a former human being who will soon add your quiescent flesh and screaming brain to the mother of all mushroom beds. Like any man who has ever spoken to his god, you're also answering your own questions. Those spores attack the mind, cause it to compartmentalize, to create a multiplicity of simulated consciousnesses.

The guard traced the wall of memory in search of a crack, a flaw, a blackout, that might signal the demarcation of dream and reality, the place he'd swerved from the road. He found, with a feeble pang, that everything prior to this terrifying moment in the dark, was rapidly crumbling and sliding into an abyss. What he'd eaten for breakfast, listened to on the radio while commuting to work, his home phone number, his mother's maiden name, gone. All of it siphoned away. He caught a glimpse of himself driving across a landscape crawling with white cotton candy, the dark bulk of the prison enmeshed in it like a tumor eating its way through a lung. He glimpsed bloated half-corpses of men in cells, quietly rupturing, birthing pallid tendrils and tubers. He said, —Please, no. Let me go.

—Go where? It’s all over but the crying out there. The Rapture you all waited for hath come at last. Be at ease. I’m going to kiss you. The convict’s breath was ripe and cool and very close. —Welcome to the garden of our lords. And his tepid mouth closed over the guard’s. It tasted of sweet, black earth, raw with ferment. The guard struggled, imagining a billion spores shooting down his throat, crocheting a murderous skein through his internal organs. He felt his blood reversing up the esophageal passage, engorging the parasite mounted atop him. Everything brightened, became white incandescence. He screamed into the mouth suctioning his own.

The guard shuddered and opened his eyes and nearly fell, as vertigo assailed him. He was still leaning against the wall; the cigarette still smoldered in his hand; the convict watched him, features obscured in shadow. The light at the intersection dimmed and flickered, then was steady. —My god. My god.

—You okay? the convict said. He sounded concerned, sounded himself again.

—What were we talking about?

—How I almost got away, but ended up in this shithole? Gonna be a movie of my life story. Starring you and me.

—Before that. Before that.

—There’s nothin’ before that, man. Nothin’ important, anyhow.

—We’ve been away too long. Better get back to the block, see you to your bunk. The guard said this without conviction, his thoughts turned inward, a snow flurry accelerating away from his grasping fingers.

—I got an idea, the convict said. —Nobody’s missin’ us. C’mere. Let’s rest a while, here in the dark. He opened his arms.

The guard smoked his cigarette to the filter, vaguely troubled. The vertigo dissipated, replaced by contentment, a diluted sensation of euphoria he hadn’t experienced in an age and almost didn’t recognize. He crushed the butt under his shoe. He slouched over to the convict, and pressed into the circle of his arm, and closed his eyes. His heart began to speed. —Ah, I know what this is, he said.

—Yeah, what?

—Love, the guard said. —This is what falling in love feels like.

The convict laughed and kissed him softly, first on the neck, then the mouth. It went on forever.

Blood and Stardust

This version taken from *The Mad Scientist's Guide to World Domination*, 2013

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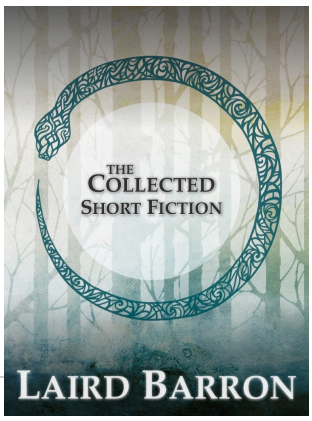

Three years later, as I hike my skirt to urinate in a dark alley in the slums of Kolkata, my arms are grasped from behind. The Doctor whispers, "So, we meet again." His face was ruined in the explosion—its severe, patrician mold is melted and crudely reformed as if an idiot child had gotten his or her stubby fingers on God's modeling clay. I can't see it from my disadvantaged perspective, but that's not necessary. I've been following him and Pelt around since our original falling out.

Speaking of the devil… Pelt slips from the shadows and drives his favorite dirk, first through my belly, then, after he smirks at the blood splattering onto our shoes, my heart. He grins as he twists the blade like he's winding a watch.

"—and this time the advantage is mine." I laugh with pure malice, and die.

Storms unnerve me. I hate thunder and lightning—they make me jumpy, even in the Hammer Films I watch nearly every evening. Regardless of the patent cheesiness, it awakens my primitive dread. Considering the circumstances of my birth, that makes sense. Fear of the mother of elements is hardwired into me.

My nerves weren't always so frayed; once, I was too dull to fear anything but the Master's voice and his lash. I was incurious until my fifth or sixth birthday and thick as a brick physically and intellectually. Anymore, I read anything that doesn't have the covers glued shut. I devour talk radio and Oprah. Consequently, my neuroses have spread like weeds. Am I getting fat? Yes, I've got the squat frame of a Bulgarian power lifter, but at least my

moles and wens usually distract the eye from my bulging trapeziuses and hairy arms.

I also dislike the dark, and wind, and being trussed hand and foot and left hanging in a closet. Dr. Kob used to give me the last as punishment; still does it now and again, needed or not, as a reminder. Perspective is extremely important in the Kob house. The whole situation is rather pathetic, because chief among his eccentric proclivities, he's an amateur storm chaser. Tornadoes and cyclones don't interest him so much as lightning and its capacity for destruction and death. Up until his recent deteriorating health, we'd bundle into the van and cruise along the coast during storm season and shoot video, and perform field tests of his arcane equipment. Happily, those days seem to be gone, and none too soon. It's rumored my predecessor, daughter *numero uno,* was blown to smithereens, and her ashes scattered upon the tides, during one of those summer outings.

Time has come for action.

My birthday was Saturday. I'm thirty, a nice round number. By thirty, a girl should have career aspirations, picked out a man, that sort of thing. I stuck the white candle of death in a cupcake, said my prayers, and ate the damned thing with all the joy of a Catholic choking down a supersized holy wafer. Then I doused my sorrows with a bottle of Glenfiddich and watched a rerun of the late night creature-feature.

I've decided to record my deepest thoughts, although I'm young to be scribing even this outline of a memoir. Some bits I've written in spiral notebooks with ponies and unicorns on the cover.

We live in a big Gothic mansion on a hill outside of Olympia. We being Dr. Kob, Pelt, and me. Pelt came to the U.S. with the Master. The old troll doesn't talk much, preferring to hole up in his backyard tree house and drink Wild Turkey and sharpen his many, many knives. I call him Uncle, although so far as I know he's no more my uncle than the good Doctor is my father.

Dr. Kob's workshop is the converted attic in the East Wing. He's got a lordly view of everything from Olympia to Mt. Rainier. When he's in his cups, he refers to the people in the city as *villagers.* That's exactly how he says it—with a diabolical sneer. I think he reminisces about the Motherland more than he should. His skeletons are banging on the closet door. He just keeps jamming in new ones. I wager it'll bite him in the ass one of these fine days.

The house keeper, chef, and handyman stay in bungalows in the long shadows of the forest on the edge of the property. The gardener and his helpers commute daily. They tend the arboretum and the vast grounds. Yet despite their indefatigable efforts to chop back the vines, the brambles, and the weeds, the estate always seems overgrown. It looks a lot like the thicket around Sleeping Beauty's castle in the classic cartoons. Some rooms in the mansion leak during rainstorms. Like the grounds crew, our handyman and his boys can't replace rotten shingles and broken windows fast enough to stay ahead of entropy that's been gathering mass since 1845. There's not enough plaster or paint in the world to cover every blister and sore blighting this once great house.

But Dr. Kob doesn't care about such trivialities. He's obsessed with his research, his experiments. Best of all, there are catacombs beneath the cellars; an extensive maze chock-full of bones. Beats digging up corpses at the graveyard in the dead of night, although he waxes nostalgic about those youthful excursions.

I'm careful in my comings and goings despite the fact Dr. Kob crushes the servants under his thumb and virtually saps their will to live. He imported most of them from places like Romania and Yugoslavia. They've united in tight jawed dourness and palpable resentment. None speak English. They're paid to look the other way, to keep their mouths shut. They know what's good for them.

I worry anyway. I'm a busy bee, fetching and toting for the Master; coming and going, sneaking and skulking at all hours. Capturing live subjects is dangerous, especially when you're as conspicuous as I am. There can be complications. Once, I brought home three kids I'd caught smoking dope in the park. The chloroform wore off one of them, and when I popped the trunk he jumped out and ran into the woods, screaming bloody murder.

Luckily, Pelt was sober enough to function, for a change, and he unleashed a pair of wolfhounds from the kennel. Mean ones. We tracked the boy down before he made it to a road. The little sucker might've escaped if I hadn't cuffed his hands behind his back.

In unrelated events:

A circus rolled through town one week in the fall; in its wake, consternation and dismay due to a murder most foul. An article in the *Olympian* documents the spectacular and mysterious demise of Niall the Barker. The paper smoothes over the rough edges, skips most of the gruesome facts. The reporters in the know talked to the cops who know this: While hapless Niall lay upon his cot in a drunken stupor, some evil doer shoved a heavy-duty industrial strength cattle prod up his ass and pressed the button. His internal organs liquefied. A blowhole opened in the crown of his skull, and shit, guts, and brains bubbled forth like lava from a kid's volcano exhibit at a science fair. His muscles and skin hardened and were branded with the most curious Lichtenberg Flowers.

Sometimes I go back and watch it again, just to savor the moment.

Dr. Kob requires that we take supper together on Fridays. We sit at opposite ends of a long, Medieval-style table in the dining hall. The hall is gloomy and dusty and decorated in a fashion similar to Dracula's castle in the Bela Lugosi, Christopher Lee films. God, how I adore Christopher Lee, especially the young, B-movie incarnation. His soliloquy to carnal delights in *The Wicker Man* stands my hair on end. Dr. Kob doesn't know anything about cinema or actors. He says there's no television where he comes from, no theatre. That's likely an exaggeration—the Master is fond of hyperbole. Read a few of his interviews in the *Daily O* and you'll see what I mean.

Dr. Kob's father was an eminent scientist until some scandal swept him and his family into the shadows. After his expulsion from what ever prominent university, Kob Sr. conducted his research in the confines of home sweet home. I think of the dungeons and oubliettes in those ancient Eu rope an

keeps and feel a twinge of pity for the peasants moiling in the fields beneath the Kob estate. Ripe fruit, the lot of them.

Snooping about the Master's quarters, I unearthed a musty album full of antiquated photographs of Dr. Kob and various friends and relatives. Many feature the redoubtable Pelt. Has the hunter always been Kob's henchman? Perhaps they are fraternity brothers or blood cousins. Today the good Doctor bears a strong likeness to Boris Karloff, which is also pretty much how he looks in his baby pictures.

On the other hand, the Pelt I know scarcely resembles the man posing with a pack of hounds, his curls long and golden, his bloodthirsty grin as sweet and guileless as Saint Michael's own. What a heartbreaker (and likely serial killer) he was! One of the pictures is dated 1960. Now, he slumps over his plate and goblet. His hooked nose, his sallow cheeks are gnarled as plastic that's been melted and fused. Oh, and he's pot-bellied and bald as a tumor. It's all very sad—he's like a caricature of a Grimm Brothers' illustration. Maybe this is how Rumpelstiltskin ended his days.

"Mary had a little lamb," Dr. Kob says, and titters as he downs another glass of port. That Mary business annoys me more than he can imagine. He doesn't realize I caught on to his stupid inside joke and its antecedent years ago. *I read classical literature, too, you pompous ass.* I've Melville, Dickens, and Chaucer in the bedside cupboard. And Shelley, that bitch. On the other hand, perhaps I should be grateful. He could've named me Victor or Igor.

"—Mary had a little lamb—"

"—then she had a little mutton," Pelt says in an accent so thick you'd need one of his pig-stickers to cut it. I don't think Pelt likes me, our occasional drunken coupling notwithstanding. It's not exactly easy to find a good screw in this pit. I wonder if Dr. Kob knows about Pelt and me. The Old Man is cagey—I wouldn't be surprised if Pelt reported the results of our trysts as part of some twisted experiment like the Apted documentaries that appear on PBS every seven years. Man, I'd love to get in front of a camera and monologue about some of the shit I've seen. Yeah, there's a frustrated actor in here. A frustrated nymphomaniac as well—sorry, Pelt.

Midday now and I taste the ozone; my joints ache. From the parapet of the attic tower I can see way out across the water to where the horizon has shifted into black. It's coming on fast, that rolling hell.

The trees start to shake. Leaves come loose and flutter past my face. This is going to be a hummer. My hair is already frizzing. High elevations are bad places to be at times such as these. This particular roof is even worse than most because of all the lightning rods. Well, they aren't exactly lightning rods in the traditional sense. They serve other uses, primarily transferring electricity to the Doctor's lab equipment. Like a good gofer, I've come to make certain everything is shipshape—the array is rather delicate and must be aligned precisely. There's nothing more complicated about the job than jiggling a television antenna until the picture clears, but it has to be right or all hell might break loose.

I make the adjustments and then retreat inside and head for the kitchen. One of the chef's minions, a cook named Helga, fixes me cocoa and marshmallows. I'm sitting on one of the high stools, swinging my feet and sipping my hot chocolate when Dr. Kob comes around the corner, his usually slicked hair in disarray, his tie loose and shirt untucked.

"Mary," he says. "You double-checked the array, I presume?" He scarcely acknowledges my answer; his mind is already three jumps ahead, and besides, my loyalty is unquestioned. "One of my specimens expired last night—but all is not lost. My revivification project awaits!"

"Remember not to talk on the phone during the storm," I say. "I just saw an account of a woman who was fried doing dishes. Ball lightning exploded from the sink and set her on fire. It traveled through the pipes."

Dr. Kob stares at me, his beady eyes narrowed. He rubs his temples as if experiencing a migraine. "You're watching the talk shows again. You know how I frown upon that, my dear. Less daydreaming, more physical exertion. Remind me to have Pelt assign you additional duties. Idle hands and all that."

"Sure, gimme a pitchfork and I'll swamp out the stables."

"Never mention pitchforks again!"

"Or torches."

“Out! Before I lose patience for your belligerence. And tomorrow, take the rod into our lovely village for quality-assurance testing. I’ve altered the design. It possesses more jolt than ever.”

“As you command,” I say sweetly. After he wanders off, I chew my cup and swallow it piece by piece. It kind of frightens me that my Pavlovian dread of the Doctor has ebbed, replaced by an abiding irritation. This is very dangerous. He’s a middle-aged megalomaniacal child—an *L’enfant Terrible.* We know what rotten children do with their toys, right?

He gave me a puppy, once. I loved her, and often imagined how she had crept into the caves of my ancestors to escape the cold and the dark. I accidentally broke the puppy’s neck. It’s probably a good thing he didn’t hand me the little brother I always wanted.

Some people mow the lawn, others take out the garbage, or walk the pooch. Among similar menial tasks, I kidnap and kill whomever the Doctor says to kidnap or kill. I enjoyed it during my formative years. My rudimentary self was a glutton for the endorphin rush, the ecstasy of primal release. As my brain evolved, I developed, if not a conscience, at least the semblance of ethics. The glamour has faded, alas, and now this, too, bores me to tears. Frankly, it’s about as stimulating as tearing the limbs off dolls.

Usually I do the deed with this device Dr. Kob invented that’s something on the order of an unimaginably powerful cattle prod. This prod is capable of emitting a charge much greater than the lethally electrified fences one might encounter surrounding a top-secret military installation. It fits in my coat pocket and telescopes with the flick of my wrist, like those baton whips cops use to pacify rowdy protesters.

There are two basic methods of killing with the rod. (Dr. Kob encourages ample experimentation.) I jumped out of a hedge and zapped the last one, a banker in a suit and tie, from a distance of six paces. He shuddered and dropped in his tracks as if shot. Sometimes the energy exits from the temple or forehead and leaves a small hole like a bullet wound. I prefer to discharge from beyond arm’s reach as a safety precaution, but it’s not always feasible.

The second method is rather awful. The rod is thick at the base and gradually tapers to a point the diameter of a darning needle. A few weeks back I ministered to those two pole dancers who made such a sensation when the cops discovered them. And hell no, that particular job didn't bother me a whit. I'm not altogether fond of the pretty ones, and when they're haughty little bitch queens to boot… well, I consider it justice served. Anyway, their house mate walked in on the proceedings. I recognized him as a bouncer from the club where the girls worked—a powerfully built guy tattooed front and back, with head-to-toe chains and piercings, and yellow, piggy eyes that burned with a love of violence. He almost got his hands on me before I stabbed him in the chest with the rod and dialed up the juice. The force hurled him end over end into the wall, where he sprawled, limbs flailing *grand mal* style. His eyes sizzled like egg yolks and sucked into his skull; his teeth shattered, his hair ignited, and all that miscellaneous metal reduced to slag as his skin charred and peeled. I'm no weak sister, but the greasy smoke, its stench, always gets me. I ran to the window and puked into a flower box. Then I got the hell out.

Dr. Kob wanted to hear everything, of course.

My lifelong fantasy about running away with the circus isn't likely to pan out. I'm okay with that. I buy tickets when a show's in town and make excuses to disappear for a few hours. Dr. Kob took me once when I was a child; for a while, he had this fascination with pretending I was his little girl. We went a lot of places during that happy period: picnics on the beach, the carnival, ice skating at the mall, and similarly nutty stuff. Nutty, because it was so damned out of character for the Doctor.

The circus is what sticks in my mind and I've continued to go long after the Doctor lost all interest in passing me off as his ugly daughter. I've even convinced Pelt to come along a couple of times, but not since he got into a row with a gang of carnies and cut off three fingers of one poor bastard. Pelt's an unpleasant drunk, to say the least.

A couple of weeks before my birthday, I'm scanning the paper and spot an advertisement for the impending arrival of the Banning Traveling Circus. Of such trivial things is treachery made…

This is a minor show, no Ringling Brothers extravaganza by any stretch, but it has elephants and trapeze artists and shiny women in leotards. One of the shiny women has long hair done in a single braid. A man dangles by his knees from the high swing, her hair clamped in his teeth as she spins below him with such velocity her limbs merge with her torso. The clowns zoom into the ring in their clown car, and the dancing bear wobbles in on his unicycle. Hijinks ensue. I clap, unable to contain my glee. It's all so damned simple I could cry.

After the main show I wander the grounds, a paper cup of beer in hand, a blob of pink cotton candy in the other. I resist the urge to visit the freak tent, and always fail. It's usually lame, and this collection is weaker than most. Crocodile Boy has a serious overbite, and that's it. He's from Georgia and works as a hairdresser in the offseason. No two-headed babies, no wolf men. The bearded lady is rather impressive, though. She's a brawny, Bavarian lass named Lila, who'd fit right in with the mansion staff. Her beard isn't particularly thick, yet it's immaculate and descends to her navel. Its point is waxed and gives her a sort of Mandarin vibe. She has the softest, greenest eyes.

She does her thing and it's getting dark, so the crowds trickle back to the parking lot under the pall of burnt kettle corn. Lila, Edna the tattooed lady, and I are talking and they invite me to the "after the show get-together"; a bunch of them always do. They gather under some tarps pitched between their trailers and wagons. I meet Cleo the strongman (who's definitely over the hill and suffering from chronic asthma), and Buddy Lemon and his wife Sri Lanka, the trapeze artists, and Armand, the guy who trains the lions and elephants, although I'm informed he sucks at both by Lila, who whispers that two of the lions have mauled people and Dino stomped on a carnie, all in the last three months. Judging from how fast Armand guzzles a bottle of corn mash, I suspect she may be on to something.

They're a sweet bunch, raw and melancholy. As always, there's got to be one asshole in the crowd, though. A barker named Niall. A pigeon-chested guy with a pencil moustache and a waist like a fashion model. His crappy yellow-and-white striped suit is cut a size too small, even for him. He makes a snide remark about my "swarthy, and exceptionally stout" personage in a smarmy English accent. He tells Cleo to "watch out, mate,

she appears as if she could beat you out of a job." I'm relieved and grateful when Lila glares and he slinks off to his quarters.

As the group drifts apart, Lila grabs my arm and says to come with her back to the trailer. I'm privately questioning the wisdom of this, because I've never had another woman come on to me before, and more importantly, there's the Doctor to consider. He keeps strange hours. There's no telling what mood he's in. I might be punished for leaving the house without permission. But I'm in a perverse mood so I follow her.

We're surrounded by farmland and it's extra dark on account of it being a moonless night, which Lila tells me is perfect for stargazing. She says the constellation she's been monitoring is tricky to capture due to its distance. Light pollution only adds to the degree of difficulty. She spends a few minutes adjusting the rig and muttering to herself, and I steady her elbow as she sways on unsteady legs.

Finally, she says, "Okay, all right, here we go. I'm getting damned good at this—you have no idea how hard it is to nail down the Serpens galaxy." She guides my eye to the viewfinder and makes adjustments as I describe what I see, which at first isn't much but black space punctuated by random lights.

Then, "Oh. It's… beautiful." And it *is* beautiful, an impossibly remote field of stars veiled in clouds of dust and gas, and at its heart, a wavering flame that illuminates from the inside out, like fire shining through a smoky glass. I know it's old, old. Older even than my ancestors who scrabbled and clawed in the earliest days on this rock.

"Have you used a telescope before?"

"No," I say, slightly embarrassed that Dr. Kob often visits the Deer Mountain Observatory just a few miles from our house and yet I've never once asked to tag along.

"Don't blink," she says. "Like my Pa used to say, 'You gotta hold your jaw just right' when he taught me how to fire his deer gun. You blink, NCG 6118 will go *poof* and you might not ever find her again."

"How *do* you find her again?" I don't need Lila to explain her fascination with the constellation, her fear of losing it forever. Its austere beauty stirs something cold in my breast.

“I memorized her position. Also, I’ve got a chart with the coordinates and the Dreyer description. Doesn’t make it easy, though.”

“You wrote it down? Where?”

“It’s in my stuff. In my suitcase.”

“I’d love to see it,” I say.

“Yeah? Why? This some kind of trick to get me cozy in my trailer?”

I wrestle my gaze from the telescope and take her small hand in mine. “Something like that.”

“Man alive, I’d love to see it through a real telescope.”

I think about the mega-powerful telescope owned by the Redfield Observatory and tremble. “What about your family? Couldn’t your dad pull a few strings?”

“Yeah, if I hadn’t left him behind for all this.” She laughs. “I haven’t spoken to him in… a while.”

“Father-daughter relationships are the worst,” I say.

We pack it in and meander to her trailer. She shares it with a couple of other girls, but one missed the trip, and the other stays with a boyfriend when she’s in town. Nothing happens. We have a couple of Southern Comfort nightcaps. Then she falls asleep on her dumpy couch. After she’s snoring, I rummage through her bags and find the astronomical charts she’s gathered and stick the one I need into my pocket next to the cold, lethal smoothness of the prod. I smooch Lila’s furry cheek on my way out the door.

The storm broadsides the estate an hour or so before dark.

The Doctor has sent word that I’m to report to the laboratory at once. He requires me at the crank that revs up the dynamo. Like all his gadgets, the crank is unwieldy and impractical and nobody else is physically strong enough to make it turn with sufficient speed. The combination of my efforts and the electrical storm are crucial one-two punches in the pursuit of scientific progress. To night’s the night he jump-starts yet another patchwork corpse, and maybe this time it’ll work and he’ll snag the Nobel

and show his lamentably deceased dad who the *real* scientist is in the family.

At the moment, I'm on the front porch, standing beneath the awning, goggling at nature's wrath. Thin, jagged bolts of lightning splinter in white hot strokes that repeat every fifteen to twenty seconds. Wind and rain crash upon the eaves like an avalanche. By some confluence of atmospheric forces, the air dims and reddens as the grounds have been transmogrified into the soundstage of a Martian epic. I swing my hand back and forth, fascinated at how it seems to float and multiply as it drags through the bloody light. I skip from the sheltering eaves toward the middle of the driveway, feigning carefree abandon as I throw my hands skyward and tilt my face so water streams from it. The reality is, the strikes are marching ever closer and I want to get the hell clear of the house.

Pelt sits in a rocker by the rail of the third-floor balcony. He strikes a match on the sole of his cowboy boot and lights one of his nasty hand-rolled cigarettes I can smell from a hundred yards away. He eyes me with the cold intensity of a raptor studying a mouse and I wonder if his instincts are actually that damned sharp. Could he really know? The notion chills me in a way the deluge can't.

A second later none of that matters. Lightning flares directly overhead, and I feel in my bones that this is it, *this* bolt has been drawn into the array. And man, oh, man, had I screwed that over big-time earlier in the day. I clap my hand over my eyes. The blue-white flash stabs through the cracks between my fingers. The top of the house explodes and the effect is epic beyond my fondest dreams. The concussion sits me down, hard, as all the windows on this side of the building shatter. Fiery chunks of wood, glass, and stone arc upward and outward in a ring. Debris crashes to earth in the gardens, is catapulted among the waving treetops. It's glorious.

The house remains upright, although minus a substantial portion of the third story. Smoke pours down the sides of the building, thick and black, and chivvied by blasts of wind; it roils across the muddy yard and acres of lawn, lowering a hellish, apocalyptic shroud over the works. I'm on my feet again and primed for violence. Pelt will be coming for me. Except, the sly bastard's vanished—his left boot is stuck in the mud near the front steps. I hope against hope he's dead. Servants stumble through the smoke, clutching

each other. Their quarters occupy the ground floor, so I doubt any got caught in the explosion. This is their lucky day. None of them glance at me as they file past, moaning and sobbing like a chain of ghosts.

I have to be sure. The rain kills the worst of the flames, snuffs them before they can create an inferno. The grand staircase is in sorry shape. Several steps are gone. I hopscotch my way onward and upward while lightning flashes through the giant hole in the ceiling. Happily, the laboratory, its various sinister machines, have been obliterated. Upon closer inspection, I spy the Doctor's mangled and gruesomely mutilated person fallen through the floor where it lies pinned beneath a shattered beam. His body is burnt and crushed. He's quite mindless in his agonies, shrieking for his dead parents and the friends he doesn't have.

Yeah, I should finish the job. That's the smart move. Alas, alack, I'm too melodramatic to take the easy way out.

The Doctor keeps a machine in the cellar. When I'm feeling blue I sneak down and bathe in its unearthly glow. It kicks mad-scientist old school; a mass of bulbs and monster transistors, Tesla coils, exposed circuitry, and cables as thick as pythons going every which way. At the heart of this '50s gadgetry is a bubble of glass with an upright table for a passenger. Allegedly the bubble shifts through time and space. Dr. Kob's grandfather built the prototype in 1879, powered it via lightning stored in an array of crude batteries. The new model still runs on deep cycle batteries Dr. Kob Jr. scavenged from backhoes and bulldozers.

The main reason the Master traps lightning to energize his devices is because they suck so much juice the electric bill would draw prying eyes sooner rather than later. There's a backup diesel generator gathering dust for a true emergency. The Doctor is sentimental about his methods, obsessed with the holistic nature of the process. He won't drive or fly, won't operate a computer, not even a typewriter. He scratches in his voluminous journals with quill and ink. In the mansion, every lamp runs on kerosene; the stoves and furnaces, coal; our black and white televisions and radios, batteries. We're like an evil alternate universe version of the Amish.

The T&S machine holds special significance for me, because that's the device of my genesis, my cradle and incubator. Dr. Kob reached back into the great dark heart of prehistory to pluck an egg from my mother's womb and fertilized it with God knows what. He effected a few cosmetic alterations to bring me marginally in line with the latest iteration of the species, dressed me up like a real girl, taught me to walk and talk and hold a spoon. He forbade my partaking in any sort of significant education—apparently he couldn't reconcile his anthropological interest with his fear that I might become too smart for his health. Indeed, I'm certain if he ever had the slightest inkling of my true intellectual capacity, he'd have sent Pelt to slit my throat in the night.

However, I learned to read, no thanks to him. Poor dearly departed Goldilocks took care of that on the sly. I was ripping through college level lit by the tender age of fourteen. Eliza Doolittle, eat your heart out.

The procedure hasn't been without unexpected complications, however. You wouldn't believe my psychedelic dreams, and if I'm ever caught and placed on trial for crimes against humanity, I'll get an insanity pass on the descriptions alone. Genetic memory? I dunno; all I know is that in dreams I go for a ride on an astral carpet to a high desert wasteland that spreads under a wide carnivorous sky. The tribe kills with rocks and clubs; it assembles in caves and lays its feasts upon the dirt. They haven't invented fire, thus meat and skin is crushed and smeared on rocks, like fingerpaint and wet clay. The brutes, my people, see my apparition, doubtless grotesque in its familiarity, and hoot in alarm and outrage, jam-red mouths agape. Then, the large males, the killers, snarl and snatch up their clubs and their stones, and hop toward me with murder on their minds.

Nine times out of ten, I jerk into wakefulness, alone in my dingy cell with the television screen full of snow. The tenth time out of ten, I come to in a field, naked and covered in scabs of blood, with no memory but the dream memories.

Even the Doctor isn't quite mad enough to do what I've done. He's a lunatic, yes indeed. He's also a survivor. Better than most, he understands that one screws with the infinite at one's own peril. I'm sure the

meticulously recorded results of those Victorian experiments with peasantry cooled his jets.

I, on the other hand, am a desperate sort.

Those nights the good Doctor and his toady spent drunk off their asses, I took the T&S Machine for joyrides. The calibrations weren't difficult—I simply plugged in the various sequences from Doctor Kob's logs. The wild part is, the machine goes forward and back and to any physical location in the universe, provided one has the coordinates. The places I've gone, weirder and more frightening than those Technicolor nightmares.

After Doctor Kob and Pelt murder me in that squalid alley, I give them a moment to wonder at my dying words. But it's only a possible me, a shadow. Travelers exist in duplicate during collocation. It's complicated; suffice to say, each of us unique snowflakes, aren't. We exist as a plurality. That old saw about meeting yourself… it's only kinda true. The universe didn't unravel when I skipped ahead and met one of my future selves, an inveterate alcoholic and aimless wanderer, one bound to run afoul of Dr. Kob's plots of revenge. If she's anything like me (ha-ha!), she won't mind making the sacrifice to even the score.

Pelt knows something's wrong, but even as he turns I tap him with the prod and he's gone in a belch of gas and flame. The Doctor takes it in stride. He's a hobbled shell of a man, yet arrogant as ever. He commands me to drop the weapon and submit to my well-deserved punishment. I slug him and he falls unconscious. That feels so good, I've revisited the moment a dozen times.

This is how it ends for Daddy dearest: I strap him into the machine and send him to the land of my ancestors, and once he's evaporated into the abyss of Time I take an axe to the machine. I've gotten my kicks. That con science I've been incubating stings like hell. Who knows what havoc I might wreak on material existence were I to keep dicking around with the timestream.

I sent the Doctor with a mint copy of *Frankenstein,* a dozen bottles of wine, and the prod with a full charge. It's the least I could do. The very least.

I track the Banning Circus to a show in Wenatchee. The owner, the great-great-grandson of Ezra Banning, is skeptical when I apply for the strongman job. He's got a strongman, he says, and I say I know. I also know his guy is getting long in the tooth and suffers from asthma, or emphysema, or what ever. Banning tells me to hit the bricks, he's a busy man, blah, blah. I walk over to the lion cage and tear the door off its hinges—naturally, I try to make it look casual, but the effort does me in for the day. The owner picks up his jaw. He sends one of his flunkies to break the news to poor Cleo. He doesn't even mind that it takes Armand the better part of two days and the assistance of local animal control to corral their lion and get him into his cage.

I knock on Lila's trailer door. A monster storm cloud is massing in the north and that could be good or bad. It certainly sets the scene. My hair is standing on end. Lila screams and throws her arms around me. She's crying a little and there's snot in her beard.

"Hey, this is for you," I say and give her a small wooden coffer I bought off a guy at a garage sale where I also scored some dumbbells to get in shape for my strongman—*strongperson*—audition.

"What is it?" She lifts the lid and gasps. An eerie golden light plays over her face.

"Stardust."

"Stardust?"

"I hope it's not radioactive. Maybe we should get a Geiger counter."

"You're yanking my chain."

I smile. "Never happen."

"Well… my God. Look at this. Where…?"

I take the folded, spindled, and mutilated piece of paper with the Dreyer entry for galaxy N1168 from my pocket and give it to her. Lightning parts the red sky like a cleaver. It reflects twin novas in her eyes. I grasp her free hand and press it against my heart.

Three, two, one. *Boom.*

LD50

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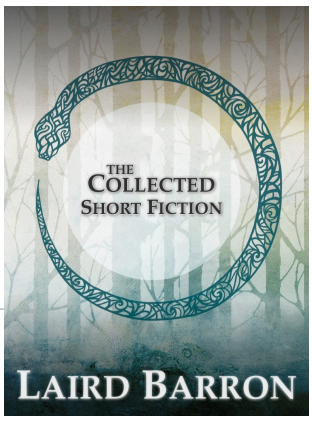


Despite the pervasiveness of instant communication, smart phones, video-capable eyeglasses, and twenty four hour cable media, I generally slip under the radar. While I'm not homely, I've got one of those faces you can't help but forget even though the name Jessica Mace trips off the tongue, the answer to a crossword puzzle, no doubt. In this age of daily horrors going at ten cents a bushel, what happened to me in Alaska three years ago is ancient enough news to be catalogued alongside floor plans for the Pyramids.

The first thing people ask if they catch me without a turtleneck or a scarf is, Oh my god, what happened to your neck? Then I tell them to go piss up a rope and that is inevitably that. We aren't going to discuss it now, either.

Moving on.

I won't give you the entire picture. You can have snapshots. Order them any way you please. Make of them what you will. This is your mystery to solve.

Late one summer I was hitching through Eastern Washington.

Jesus on a pony, there's a whole lot of nothing for you. Chatted up a few locals and got the lay of the land. Twigged to the fact that that part of the world rivaled Alaska for incident rates of theft, murder, rape, and diabolism —amateur and professional.

A longhaul trucker who gave me a lift bragged that the meth labs were so prevalent they formed a Crystal Triangle, the Mexicans were taking over, first wave was migrants working the apple orchards and now the cartels had their hooks in just like in Arizona and Texas. Tourist attractions included the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, Walla Walla State Prison, and the J.W.

Trevan Memorial Testing Facility. The first and the last concocted the poison and the middle supplied the control population. Just kidding, everybody knew big animal shelters in Seattle and Spokane provided the subjects, forever homes his foot. He offered me a twenty-spot to blow him and I bailed at the weigh station before the wheels stopped rolling.

A farmer and his grandson chided me for thumbing, it wasn't safe for a young lady, insert lecture here. The farmer was aggrieved because somebody poisoned his German Shepherd and hacked off its paws. Stole the paws, left the dog. I mean, damn. That bad news was making the rounds. The waitress at the diner where I got dropped by Farmer Brown said it was a shame, the Devil Hisownself at work through the instrument of some godless sicko. *Thirty dogs since Easter*, said the fry cook as he watched me push my cheeseburger aside. *Nuh-uh, eighty or ninety,* chimed in a barfly who was sipping from a brown paper bag at nine in the a.m. *A serial killer of mutts*, said the cook, shaking his head. Pooches snatched from yards and kennels, later found stabbed, decapitated, pierced with arrows, ritually dismembered. *You know what mutilating animals leads to*, said the waitress. *People!* said the barfly and grinned. The sheriff's department was on the case, which meant there'd be three hundred dogs slaughtered before that nimrod Sheriff Danker Brunner caught a clue. Then cookie got going on a rape trial concerning a high school football team the next county over and I tuned my brain to another frequency.

Did some loon think a dog's foot might be a lucky charm? Did he string them from his rearview? Did he mount the heads on the wall of his shack? Did he have a Fido to call his own? Those interstate hookers might want to watch themselves, being a lateral link in the food chain, except nobody cares about hookers the way they get out pitchforks and torches for the plight of mutts.

Rednecks flying Dixie colors from the antenna of their monster truck chucked a bottle at me as I waited for the next hitch at the pull in. Who says you can't go home again. Who says you ever get away.

I danced with a cowboy named Stefano Hoyle at a tavern near the freeway offramp. His shirt smelled of Old Spice and tobacco. He possessed an aura

reminiscent of the Yukon fishermen and hunters I'd known in the Forty-ninth state. A radioactive strangeness that drew me like a magnet, made me all tingly. Said he'd never been to Alaska, had always lived here in purgatory. Hated the cold and Eastern WA got plenty. He didn't have much more to give, measured his words as if they were pearls. I am a reader between lines kind of gal so we got along dandy.

One Cuervo led to a shitload more Cuervo and we fucked away half the weekend back at his trailer. Basking in the afterglow, I decided to hang around and see where the ride went.

Hoyle didn't ask about the bitchin' scar in his haste to get my clothes off, although he was also pretty goddamned drunk and it was dark, so I figured for sure by the cold light of morning, et cetera, and still not a peep. Tall, dark, and handsome fixed us bacon and toast and I finally became exasperated lounging there in a bra and Hello Kitty panties and told him the score, how I got my throat cut and how I got back my own, or maybe got back some of my own, at the end of that spooky fairytale in the frozen north. Real deal fairytales are all about nasty sex, blood, and cannibalism, just like real life. I tend to babble after a righteous fuck, but I possessed the presence of mind to leave out a few details of the incident, such as me busting caps into a dyed in the wool mass murderer. Girl's gotta hold something in reserve for the second date.

He shrugged and tipped his Stetson back and said how'd I like my eggs and then served them to me overdone as steel-belted tires anyway. That Stetson, incidentally, was the only thing he ever wore until five minutes before exiting the trailer to perform his cowboy routine.

Nice enough body, could have made the grade for a young nekkid Marlboro Man calendar in a pinch. It was also obvious that between chain smoking Pall Malls, chugging booze, and taking a beating from the elements, he'd be a woofer in a few more years. Weathered, is the polite term and it's why my policy is to snag them while they're young.

He pulled on a long sleeve shirt and blue jeans and grabbed a rifle from where it rested against a pile of laundry. Flicked me a Gila monster glance as he limped into the yard. Real deal cowboys, not assholes who wear ten gallon hats and dinner plate belt buckles to the office or while sipping wine

coolers, are bowlegged, and all of them limp. When you call to a real deal cowboy, he turns his body, not his neck. Busted ribs, busted vertebrae, and yeah getting kicked in the face by a bucking bronco smarts. They all chew, or smoke, or both, and they drink. Every mother loving one of them.

His trailer was an Airstream from the ’50s. One door. Windows so tiny you’d have to be a rattler to shimmy through. It teetered on cinderblocks, verging that big ass nothing I mentioned earlier. Two acres of empty chicken coops, junk cars and a pair of corrals taken over by ant mounds. A fire ant colony, the advance guard of a South American invasion force. The barn had collapsed. Country & Western version of the projects. He’d inherited the whole shebang from his folks. Dead for ten years, Mom and Dad; a brother, or sister, in Canada soaking up that sweet, sweet, socialized everything. No pets, pets were a tie down. I looked around at the desolation when he said that, kept my mouth shut for once.

Hoyle was proud to show me his motorcycle, a Kawasaki he’d gotten on the cheap from his pal Lonnie. Did I know anything about motor bikes? Told him my late uncle was a motocross fanatic, took me riding on the Knik Flats when I was a kid, showed me how to tune a carburetor and change a spark plug, just the basics. Hoyle seemed impressed with my tomboy ingenuity. His bike had some problems, it stalled and stuttered, and he wasn’t exactly a mechanic, although he tinkered with it every chance he got. His cousin died in a motorcycle crackup, rear-ended a semi at highway speed and after divulging that info he changed the subject by not speaking again for half an hour.

Way off through the haze and the hayricks and rough hills were mountains, the ancient worn down kind. The landscape was arrested mid evolution; all the worst qualities of salt plain and high desert and not a tree for miles, frozen like that forever. Could have been tar pits from the look of things, mammoth tusks scattered. Even in hot weather, and Jesus it was hot that year, the dry wind had an edge. The grit between my teeth tasted of alkali and it was always there, always made me yearn to rinse my mouth. Made me wonder if it was the same phenomena here as on the tundra, if the emptiness treated your mind like a kid deforming a slinky.

I asked where to as he climbed into his old Ford flatbed. Gods, I hated my voice. Sounded like a rusty hinge. Another detail that raised brows, but not

his. Unflappable he, I bet a scorpion could scuttle over him and not get a rise. He laid the rifle on the rear window rack and cranked up his rig. Of course the radio was dialed to a station that spun the ghosts of Hank Williams, Roger Miller, and Ernest Tubb.

The roads were either cracked blacktop, dirt, or wagon trails, depending. You traveled in a cloud of dust. I lighted another cigarette and squinted through a pair of sunglasses I'd swiped at a liquor store in Vancouver.

"Last book I read was *Stallion Gate*," Hoyle drawled. A recitation. "Favorite movie is *The Food of the Gods*. You agreed to come home with me because there's something about my eyes." This was in response to a survey question I'd asked at the bar thirty-six hours prior. So it went with him. Drop in a quarter and the music would play sooner or later if you stuck in there.

"Smith's least appreciated book, that movie is terrible, and yeah. You're right on. You've got angel eyes, like Lee Van Cleef." I shifted on the bench seat because the KaBar strapped to my hip was digging in. I'd ditched the .38 since I didn't qualify for a concealed carry permit and none of the cops I'd met had any kind of a sense of humor, so a pistol was too risky for my taste. The knife had already earned its keep when a sketchy dude hassled me at a campsite along the Alcan Highway. Scared him off, no slicing necessary. I didn't think Hoyle harbored ill intentions, hoped not. Time would tell. Mr. Ka-Bar gave me a little security anyhow.

"You like to shoot?" he said out of the blue.

The road reeled us further and further into North American badlands variety of veldt. I almost laughed, caught myself, lowered my shades, and gave him a bug-eyed glance that passed for innocence.

"What are we shooting?" I said.

"Sunday's my day of rest," he said. "So, coyotes."

"One thing leads to another."

"What?"

"It's not a country song," I said.

Hoyle parked in the middle of nowhere and we walked to a blind of grass and brush built on the lip of a gully. Perfect three hundred and sixty degree view of the great empty. Patches of cattle tried to stay in the shade of cloud dapples. Fences between them and us. Corroded barbed wire, petrified posts, rocks, tumbleweeds, lightning-struck charred bones.

He brought a jug of water and a pair of binoculars; decided against the Varmint Suit, as he called it: an olive gray camo set of matching pants and coat; a sniper outfit webbed with netting and faux vegetation. Gave me the chills just to see it bundled there by the spare tire like some discarded rubber monster suit from a Universal sound stage and I felt relief that he didn't climb inside, didn't strip away his humanity through the addition. The VS was hot and bulky and he saved it for tricky hunts, the kill of kills. Today wasn't tricky, it was straightforward as she got.

We nestled onto a mat in near darkness of the shelter and peeked through cunning slits in the blind at the bright old world. The blind was one of a dozen he'd erected across the prairie. His custom was to tour them over the course of a season, catch as catch could. Mainly, he strung wire and drove tractors for the neighborhood farmers. This was how he earned tequila and cigarette money. Picking up bitches money, is what he mumbled, or what I heard.

"I don't think I like this," I said, quiet as if we were in church.

He told me how it was, laconic, nothing wasted.

Government paid fifty bucks a pelt with a waterproof form to fill in—time, date, sex, method, latitude and longitude, a tiny print wall of other bureaucratic bullshit. The state predator culling program guide claimed winter and spring to be superior to late summer for purposes of controlling the population. Hunters didn't give a damn. Fifty bucks was fifty bucks and a dead coyote was one less coyote, which was good.

"Predators-schmedators. Everything's got a right to live," I said, believing it.

"They eat kittens," he said.

"Coyotes do not eat kittens. Where the hell do they find kittens?"

“Kittens. Puppies. Lambs and calves. Foals if they can get ’em. You name it. Scarf ’em bloody and bawlin’ out a mama’s womb. Wile E. is a merciless fucker.” He smiled at me and his eyes had a bit of merciless fucker in them too. Made me a teeny bit hot.

“Kittens? Really?”

“Yep. A pack went for a baby at a picnic a few years back. A human baby.”

“Ah. This is a noble enterprise. You’re an exterminator. That it?”

“Sure. I guess.”

“You enjoy it so much, I’m kind of surprised you don’t do something about all these fire ant condos.”

He cracked a smile. “Now, that’s not neighborly. They’re just getting a foothold this far north. Besides, I don’t get paid to blow up anthills, Jess.”

Normally, Hoyle used electronic decoys and artificial scents and other kinds of high tech bait. Culling was an art and he’d learned everything that he knew from a true master, wouldn’t say who, though. That afternoon he kept it simple with a pocket call. A piece of plastic that created a spectrum of horrendous screeches, squeals and yowls. Distressed and dying rabbit was his specialty. A scrawny female coyote slunk from the tall grass and froze, nose lifted to get a fix on lunch. He shot her dead at two hundred yards.

We went to the carcass and he dressed it on the spot with a buck knife while the sun hammered and cooked. The slices went A B C. Done it before a thousand times, easy, you could tell. Blood, guts, the works went into a plastic bag and he made his notations of record on the waterproof form. Then back to the truck and a hop, skip, and a jump to another vast quadrant of prairie and a fresh killing blind.

“Next one’s yours,” he said and handed over the rifle.

“No way, Jose,” I said. “I’m not bushwhacking some hapless critter.”

“Oh, yeah you will.”

“Get bent,” I said.

“This is sacred. You’ll offend the gods.”

I worked the bolt to test the action, and maybe to back him off his he-man perch a tad. An ex taught me plenty about shooting, it simply wasn't my pastime of choice. That said, the rifle, a Ruger .223, was sleek and ultra phallic. I tasted the linseed and Three-In-One oils on it, whiffed the powder tang from the barrel. The stock fit my shoulder, snug. Deer gun, a woman's gun.

I shot two males, but made him do the skinning.

It got dark and we knocked off for dinner at that seedy tavern of our initial fateful rendezvous. I compounded my daily quota of moral transgressions by chomping a steak and powering a couple of beers on his tab. Although, much as it pained me to acknowledge, blasting coyotes hadn't been bad.

In fact, I'd rather enjoyed it, tried to convince myself coyote murder was therapy, if not law of the jungle justice. Doing unto predators who surely did unto the weak and the wounded, and kittens. I am human, thus a justifier of irreconcilable behavior. Therapy, right.

Therapy shouldn't get the pulse pumping, no. Lining up the trotting coyote in the scope, waiting for the precise instant, then half an exhale, squeezing the trigger, and watching the animal kick over, its slyness no bulletproof shield. Goddess of death, that's me. We aren't so far removed from the primitive iterations of our species that slurped blood from the jugular. Like dirty, sleazy sex with a complete stranger, I'd probably hate myself later. Meanwhile. As long as my pet cowboy plied me with drinks and physical comfort, that eventuality could be held at bay. I could drown myself in his bad influence and not worry about the bill that was surely coming due.

The waitress, a double dee bimbo, hung on him as floozies will do, called him Steffy and batted her fake lashes to put out a fire. I wondered if he'd fucked her, thought probably, definitely. He went to the men's room and I caught her in passing, asked how they knew each other, sizing up the competition, I told myself. Flexing the claws, that was it. She gave me a dead cow stare and said she didn't know my boyfriend, slung him drinks and that didn't mean shit from Shinola, and kept trucking. Busy woman. Bumpkins at every table and bellied to the bar, even on a Sunday night. Her

whore purse would be stuffed with folding green by last call and the long walk in the dark to her Pinto at the employee end of the lot.

Hoyle returned with more beer. Sauntered back to the table with more beer, to be accurate. Bar lights limned him Travolta style. Best looking dude in the joint that night, maybe every night. His totem animal was something savage and furtive, it watched me from beneath heavy lids.

Expansive with alcohol, I said, “It occurs to me that this dog mutilation spree could be the work of a coyote hunter. Or any kind of hunter.”

“What spree?” Hoyle sipped Pabst. His lips were thin and secretive. His lips and his teeth also belonged to the animal.

“The thing. The thing. Ninety dogs, minus heads and paws. A satanic cult or a thrill kill club, according to the yokels. The sensation sweeping the nation.”

“Yeah, that. I don’t really like dogs very much. Haven’t paid attention to the gossip. On your mind, huh?”

“I like dogs. A lot.”

“Coyotes get no love?”

“Humans have a pact with dogs. You don’t break a pact.”

“Not particular to them. Not really.”

“Humans or dogs?”

“Dogs. Animals. They’re filthy.”

“It’s an unattractive quality in a man.”

He smiled, slow and easy. Occurred to me that I wasn’t expansive, I was drunk.

“You think I’m stupid. The way you speak to me.” He didn’t sound mad.

“Shallow. I think you’re shallow.” The double dee bimbo with her Daisy Dukes and red pumps, the fact he’d had her every which way, provoked my mean streak.

He studied his fingernails. Took a long pull on his brew, wiped his mouth. When he looked at me I saw myself, a pale blur, Caspar the Friendly Ghost’s sarcastic little sister. “Did you hear they’re building a telescope in Hawaii that’s more powerful than anything ever invented?”

“Why, no, Steff. I did not.” *Steffy* is what nearly escaped.

“Know what they’re going to look at with that super duper telescope?”

“The mother of all telescopes? Let me guess… The stars?”

“The beginning.”

“The beginning of what?”

“Of everything.”

He poured cheaper than Cuervo tequila all over my skin and lapped it up. No lights, no radio serenade, his breath hot in the hollow of my throat, kissed bruises on my arms, my inner thighs. After, the trailer became cold as a grave and an inkling of the consequences began to sink into my thick skull. Stars blinked through the window slot. Coyotes sang of death and vengeance on the prairie.

Hoyle rolled onto his side. His breathing steadied. I thought he’d fallen asleep when he said in a slurred voice, “It doesn’t follow that a coyote hunter is going after dogs. Not a real coyote hunter, I mean.” His lighter snicked and soon came a slow roll of smoke. That cigarette was almost gone before he finished his thought. “The coyotes are business. This other thing. It’s pleasure.”

My nakedness became quite acute.

He laid his rough hand on my belly and said, “Considering what you’ve seen, what you’ve been through. Maybe you should leave this alone.”

The trailer settled. Out there, a breeze moaned and wind chimes clinked to accompany the coyote chorus. All those dead stars shone on.

“But this has been waiting for me,” I said to him, him snoring.

Monday was riding-a-tractor-in-the-back-forty-of-some-hayseed’s-ranch-day and Hoyle departed before sunrise. I slept in until the heat made an oven of the Airstream. Glass of warm water from the tap in hand, I explored the property, ducking under withered gray clotheslines, and forging through stunted shrubs, stumps, and earth mounds that disgorged ant convoys that

streamed black in the sand. Little biting fuckers were everywhere underfoot. Tried to avoid crushing too many, but you know. That ubiquitous breeze whispered in the grass, fluted through soda bottles arranged as dingy candelabrums made of sticks, rattled the chimes and mussed my hair. The wind chimes were clumped in the petrified grasp of bushes and scrub trees, dozens of them. Metal tinged and pinged and it was almost there for me, almost but not quite. The puzzle resisted, refused to crystallize.

I got that sense of unfriendly scrutiny, of being the object of a malevolent desire, how the coyote must feel as crosshairs zero in right before its brains are blasted out the other side, yet different, this was all around me, and I ditched the glass and beat it for the trailer, ran no different than the panicked heroine in a horror flick with a chainsaw gunning maniac on her heels. Locked the door and had a breather, fists clenched, heart in spasms, gulping for air. No safer inside, though, I knew that.

Nothing happened and I calmed down, tried the television, got no picture, tried the radio, a scratchy gospel station only, and for a long stretch I sat in a lawn chair, knife balanced on my knee, while dust motes swirled and sweat poured into my socks. I put the knife away and eyed the clutter. Laundry, boxes upon boxes of magazines and Christmas lights and photograph albums, yellow receipts, camping gear, miscellanea.

Better believe I took the opportunity to ransack the place. It didn’t amount to anything.

There wasn’t a discussion regarding how long I’d stay or what it meant. Hoyle drove into the dark heart of each dawn. I’d smoke my first cigarette while his taillights dwindled. Evenings he’d straggle in from the red haze, caked in range dirt, pockets full of hay and gravel, shower and wolf his supper, down a six pack, collapse, roll onto me to fuck me somewhere along the line. My contribution was to shovel the long neglected barbeque pit and throw on hamburgers to chase all that beer, and to get fucked. Could have been worse duty and it got me where I wanted to go, or at least it got me closer and closer.

Other nights we hit the tavern.

Weeknights it was just us chickens in a suddenly cavernous hall. *Everybody off hunting Grendel*, I said, curious if he'd get it. With him it was impossible to tell. He was a cold one, my Steffy Hoyle, sharper than he appeared, possibly. No stray emotions. He didn't raise his voice or get overly excited, not even during sex, except I woke from a nightmare of strangulation to hollering and war whooping, the strident whine of an engine, stared out the window and he had that Kawasaki hell bent for leather, headlight drilling a hole into the perfect darkness. Dead drunk, naked but for hat and boots, he shrieked in atavistic joy as he slalomed through the minefield of stumps and gopher holes in the field, revving that bike for crazy as a motherfucker jumps over fallen logs and grassy berms. Crashed it in the yard while cutting donuts. Laid the machine over and it flew fifty or sixty feet, smoked and died. Took some skin off his shins and palms, the bloody mess not quite as bad as it looked. I cleaned him up, picked gravel and bits of grass from the wounds. He didn't flinch, sat stinking of alcohol, legs akimbo, eyes wild, then dull and duller, sank into a stupor, then fell asleep and in the morning it hadn't happened. But it did happen, and several other times, although he managed not to wreck the bike so badly that he needed medical attention. Matter of time. Man with a death wish usually gets what he wants.

Once, we cruised over to his friend Lonnie's house, a shotgun shack not far from the county landfill. Lonnie was a biker, or a biker wannabe, kept a massive Harley in a makeshift carport under a canvas tarp because he didn't have a garage. Guy was brawny and hairy, wore tinted aviator glasses indoors and out. Smelled of hair gel and musk. His fingernails were blacked from getting mashed. Tats and a death metal T-shirt. Death to Tyrants, Death to Infidels, Death to Everybody. Chained a pair of scarred and muscular pit bulls to the bumper of a truck on blocks. Grizzled brutes with jaws wide enough to crush my head. Sweet as puppies, not a mean bone in them. He didn't appear overly fond of the dogs and they were indifferent to him. Dogs were real friendly toward me, though. Slobbery kisses and paws to the jaw rough housing, and such. I played with them while the boys chatted about riding choppers and hunting and guns. Lonnie also moonlighted as a coyote culler. Birds of a feather, right?

On the ride home I asked if Lonnie fought the dogs, tried to make it sound casual. Hoyle didn't answer. He pressed on the accelerator and drifted into the oncoming lane as we rounded a bend. Needle pegged at eighty. Almost went head to head with a good old boy on a road grader with the blade up. Got to give it to Hoyle—he tapped the brakes and swung us past with inches to spare and his free hand never stopped stroking my leg.

During the second week I dragged a ten-speed from under the trailer where it rusted among abandoned tire rims and sheets of tin siding. A bit of chain oil and wrench work, I got the bicycle fixed right up and I pedaled my ass into town. Hadn't ridden a bike since high school and the six mile slog just about precipitated a coronary conclusion. Instant blisters, instant sunburn, steam rose from me in a trailing shadow. I staggered inside the mom and pop on main street and drank two quarts of lime Gatorade while Methuselah the Clerk observed my antics with gap toothed bemusement. Goddamned Gatorade made a snowball in my gut that wanted to ricochet right back out, but I held on, held it down. I hung tough and paid the clerk, smiled sweetly as if my lobster sunburn and chattering teeth weren't nothing but a thing.

I composed myself and moseyed around town for the rest of the afternoon. Youngish female and not terribly unattractive, nobody mistook me for a pervert or a weirdo as they would've if I'd been some bearded, sunbaked dude lurching in off the prairie. People skills, I had them, and most folks were willing to shoot the shit with me as they watered lawns, or washed cars, or slumped in the shade of their porches. I wore my shades and gave everybody a different story, all of them pure baloney. Nobody knew Hoyle, although stoner skateboard kids loitering in the mom and pop parking lot had seen him around, and I'm confident the pancake makeup tarts at the realtor and plumbing supply offices would've gotten misty-eyed at his mention.

A Vietnam vet parked in a wheelchair at the entrance to the Diamond Dee Gentleman's Club panhandling for change knew Lonnie, of course he fought his dogs, Leroy and Gunther, tons of locals did. Pit fighting was real popular. The veteran owned a collie mix with the softest, saddest brown eyes I ever did see and he covered the dog's ears when he leaned close to confide that the hardcore crowd used house pets and strays as bait for the killer breeds. The bait thing notwithstanding, fighting dogs in gladiatorial

exhibitions was innocent, really! Death was rare, usually an ear or an eye got removed at the worst, a lot of yip and yelp signifying nothing, so to speak. The other stuff going down? The dogs piled into sacrificial mounds off route 80, or buried alive in burlap bags down to Stabinham Creek? Now, that was insane. Whoever was scragging dogs wholesale was a psycho sonofabitch from the darkest pit of hell and woe unto the sap he eventually turned his knife and arrows against, because sure as horses made little green apples it would come to human butchery. See if it didn't. That assessment seemed to be the consensus and a page three story in the paper confirmed law enforcement, including the FBI, agreed. Whether the feds planned to make it a priority was another matter.

Damned if I knew what I hoped to learn from this shotgun approach to detective work. Definitely I was bored out of my skull, lurking at Hoyle's trailer. Definitely recent life events had activated a recessive sleuthing gene.

I pedaled home, slowly. Redness pooled on the horizon.

In a disappointing development, Hoyle and I didn't screw for four nights running. He poured liquor down his throat and fell into a slumber that was as unto death itself. Did not even snore, did not so much as twitch. I began to wonder what was in it for me because my days in that backwater town weren't proving out in any way, shape, or form. I dreamed of old loves lost to shipwreck and mayhem, and I dreamed of dogs I'd known, all of them gone back into the dirt. Dad waved to me from a distance where he stood amid knee-high grass, a warning in his grim smile, the white skull of a cow he raised in his left hand. He'd seldom tried to tell me anything requiring words when I was a hellion child and he didn't now. A golden darkness radiated from him and pushed me into the territory that lies just on the other side of waking. Erotic nightmares followed. These involved Hoyle, although his face was obscured by the shadow of his hat. After he'd gotten his rocks off he'd shove me from the moving truck, or leap from it himself, leave me to tumble down a cliff, be consumed in fire. Or I'd emerge unscathed and a piece of the underbrush would detach and come after me, a bear covered in leaves, bits of a shredded net, reared on its hind legs and full of Satan's own desire to fuck me or devour me, one then the other.

I'd emerge into consciousness, aroused and afraid.

With the frustration of one type of lust, the wandering kind crept into my thoughts, had me eyeing the straight shot to the distant highway, phantom engines rumbling, phantom exhaust on my lips, headlights branding an SOS into my frontal lobes. Except, Sunday came around before I got resolved and it was coyote sniping time again.

Hoyle pushed coffee at me, said he hadn't toured this particular zone in several months, then we were in the rig and moving toward a seam of light above the mountains. We didn't talk, not that there was ever much chatter, but this was two cactuses on a date quiet. The drive was longer than I expected. The road went on and on, degraded from blacktop to gravel, to dirt, to scabbed tracts of bare earth in a sea of bleached grass. Plains spread around us, larger and deeper than the sky. Spectral and wan, gradually acquiring substance like film in an acid bath. Landmarks I'd learned recently were absent or in the wrong direction.

He stopped the truck and shut it off. Reached into a duffel bag and presented me with a rabbit facsimile. Plush and brown, wired to emote vulnerability at various decibels. My task was to pace one hundred steps upwind and set the decoy in play. Once I trotted back we'd find a likely spot with a clear line of fire and settle ourselves to wait. He pecked my forehead by way of dismissal and began to scribble in his culling book. I was tempted to argue, to sneer and inform him he wasn't the bwana of me. Wasn't worth the hassle. I had a hunch I'd get on the highway east any day now, leave this shit-kicker paradise in the rearview. Thus and so.

I trudged into the prairie, sullenly counting paces, each step precisely, more or less, one yard as my Dad the Marine had taught his kiddies. Made the football field-long hike and set the robot rabbit on a log in a patch of sand and weeds. I turned and saw the truck, grill blazing with reflected sunlight, and no sign of Hoyle.

As I approached, I fully expected him to step from behind the opposite side of the cab, shaking the morning dew off his pecker, but he didn't. It became apparent he wasn't crouched in hiding and I came over and tried the doors. Locked tight, no keys in the ignition, no duffle bag with food and water. His rifle was missing from the rack. I shaded my eyes and turned a full circle,

scanning for his outline against the blankness. I shouted his name, and in the middle of all this I glanced at the bed of the truck and realized the Varmint Suit wasn't there either. The spit in my mouth dried.

Oh, what goes through a woman's mind at a moment like that.

Instinct kicked in and I went from a standstill to a sprint, six maybe seven strides in a random direction, and did a superman dive. Scratched, bruised, winded, I didn't feel a thing except my heart trying to climb out of my mouth. Those newsreels about trench fighting in World War I, G.I.'s belly-down kissing the dirt as they wriggled under barbed wire? That was me navigating a shallow depression away from the track.

I wormed along until my arms failed. I rolled over and lay still, half covered in swaying grass. Clouds inched past my face. Horses, a hound, Dumbo's lopsided head. A pair of hawks drifted along crosscurrents, wheeling and wheeling. Gnats bit me and I didn't care, my being was consumed with listening for the crunch of footsteps, although I imagined if he spotted me I would hear exactly what the doomed coyote did in its last split second on earth.

A wail rose and fell somewhere to the left. A trilling eee-ee-eeee that made my flesh prickle, made me bite my tongue lest I cry a response.

The robot rabbit's sobs described an arc that moved closer, then farther from my hiding place. I considered crawling some more once my arms revived. Too afraid to move, I pissed myself instead, counted down the seconds until the end came brutal as a tomahawk blow to my noggin. Had time to think back on a wasted youth, a life of misdeeds. I contemplated my possibly fatal morbid fascination with things better left alone. Sure, I was furious with myself. Two weeks playing chicken with dark forces, yet never truly admitting I was in over my head. I'd known, always known and the colossal scope of my pride and selfishness bore down to smother me as I bit hard on the flesh of my arm and tried to keep it together, tried not to whine like prey.

The sky grew dim, then dark. Lightning tore the blackness and thunder cracked a beat or two afterward. The cavewoman running the show in my brain, the primordial bitch dispensing adrenaline and endorphins, knew

what I'd listened to throughout the day hadn't been any mechanical rabbit and that almost undid me, almost got the waterworks going.

I sucked it up and stood. Every muscle in me complained and for a few seconds I couldn't bring myself to actually breathe. What Dad and his hunting buddies told me back in the Alaska days was if I felt the bullet, it'd be like a heavy punch. A few seconds of that and it became apparent I wasn't going to be smote from afar.

The truck was gone, probably had been for hours. It began to rain.

Sonofabitch had my purse and knapsack with the spare clothes, the handful knickknacks and keepsakes I brought with me when I split from AK. All that shit was in a burn barrel by then, and no, I didn't equivocate or second guess myself, didn't say, *Jess maybe this is a misunderstanding, maybe life has made you a wee bit paranoid. Maybe there's a logical explanation.* I was indeed a wee bit paranoid. Thank the gods. And yep, there was a logical fucking explanation.

Saving grace was I'd dressed sensibly for the trip. I had my wallet, a pack of Camel No. Nines, and a lighter. I veered due east, walked until lights from a farmhouse appeared, kept going and the clouds rolled back and stars glowed. Dawn came and I crossed a rancid stream. Dunked my head underwater, drank until I was fit to puke and rambled on, came to a two lane road I hadn't seen before and followed it back to the highway. Getting dark again. Cleaned up in a gas station John, then walked into a no tell motel one block down and rented a single. Room service pizza and two scalding showers, no booze, but that was fine. Cigarette burns in the carpet, broken box springs, and an ammonia reek was all fine too.

Comatose for eighteen hours with the TV and air-conditioner humming white noise, a chair propped under the doorknob, Mr. Ka-Bar cool against my cheek. Dreamless sleep, except in those moments before I came fully online again and a misshapen shadow lunged, made a hissing, shushing sound as it trampled the grass. I stabbed it with my knife and poof. The fact I'd doubtless be haunted by that goddamned Varmint Suit until my dying day filled me with the white hot rage men are always being warned about.

Could be that's what changed my plans from flight to payback. An old high school enemy called me VH1. Vindictive Hoochie Number One, and she wasn't wrong.

Hopped a ride to the next town with a salesman going to Seattle for a conference. He politely declined to mention the gouges on my face and arms, left me at the off ramp and went his way. Thinking to hell with hitching, I haggled with a kid over the hatchback gathering rust in front of his house. The engine had a million miles on it and sounded iffy and the tires were screwed to hell. Nonetheless, that jalopy only had to get me down the road a state or two. Better would come along. I paid three hundred cash and put a lie on the receipt. Kid was so stoned I doubt he even knew I was a woman, much less be able to ID me if it came to such a pass. As for where I got the dough, listen. Just because I enjoyed pilfering stores for sundries didn't mean I was destitute. *People Magazine* once gave me sixty grand for an interview they pared to three and half sentences and a muddy headshot. I socked that shit away.

I bought basic camping gear at a sporting goods store and spent four nights on the grounds of a state park, four more along a big river where it didn't feel as if anybody would notice. On the ninth day I parked in a gravel pit a half mile from Hoyle's trailer, sneaked closer for recon. He wasn't around. I proceeded with caution, stealthy as any woodland critter, and let myself in. Forty-five minutes on the property was forty more than necessary. Did what needed doing and got the hell out and drove to another motel, a nicer setup, and treated myself to an evening on a soft bed and half a bottle of red wine.

Swung back to check on him late the next afternoon. Hoyle's truck sat in the yard. I glassed the property with a pair of binoculars, gave it an hour before moving in. My ex lover lay behind the trailer, sprawled face down, stark staring naked except for his boots. Nearby, his bike was a crumpled mess of spokes and leaking fluids. The results were certainly more spectacular than I'd hoped for while sawing through the brake lines.

I poked him with a stick, unsure whether he was dead or playing possum. Neither, as it developed. Rolled him over and he smiled at me, teeth stained with grass and dirt. His arms worked, but that was it. I didn't see any marks beyond some bumps and abrasions. Whatever was wrong with him, I bet he'd be fine with proper medical attention.

“Hi, darling,” he said. “You had me worried, runnin’ off like that.”

I squatted and hooked under his armpits and lifted, began to shuffle backward. His legs bumped along lifelessly. Went a few steps, rested, and repeated. I dragged him into the nearer of the two corrals and propped him in a seated position, his spine braced by a post. He didn’t say anything the whole time except to ask for his Stetson because the sun was powerful warm on his neck. I fetched the hat and gave it to him. An ant climbed atop the toe of my boot, another clung to my pants cuff. I bent and brushed them aside, moved my feet to discourage the rest. Hoyle stared at the looming mound, its teeming inhabitants. The breeze stirred.

“Why?” he said, as if genuinely curious. I strode to a dead dogwood and tore free the chimes strung in its branches, flung the mess at Hoyle. He snatched it midflight, glanced at the handful of dog tags—rabies vaccinations and ID platelets—and nodded. Dozens upon dozens more clinked in their constellations on bushes, posts, clothes lines, woven into the trailer vents, every fucking where. I let him think about it while I used a branch to cover my tracks, the grooves where I’d towed him.

“Don’t you think the cops will put it together? They’ll catch you, Jess.”

“I hear Sheriff Brunner is a dumbass,” I said.

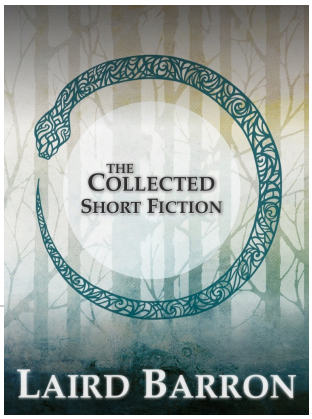
He chuckled. “Yeah. It’s true enough.”

Daylight was burning and restlessness overcame me. I gave the old boy a sip from my water bottle and tried to think of the proper words, settled for a goodbye kiss, quick and dry. We didn’t say anything for the longest time and eventually I turned and walked away. I looked over my shoulder once, right as I crested a rise that led to the road. Hoyle, indistinct at that distance, leaned forward and passed the Stetson over his legs, back and forth.

On the way through town to wherever, I stopped bold as brass, at Lonnie’s house. There was a bad moment where I worried Gunther and Leroy might’ve forgotten, had visions of getting rent limb from limb as I knelt to unleash them from the bumper of the truck. Not a chance. And when I popped the hatch, those bruisers piled into the back like they’d always belonged there.

We hit the highway eastbound, ascended into the hills and then the mountains. Kept right on going, flying.

LD50



This version taken from *Swift to Chase*, 2016
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Despite the pervasiveness of instant communication, smart phones, video-capable eyeglasses, and twenty-four-hour cable media, I generally slip under the radar. While I'm not homely, I've got one of those faces you can't help but forget even though the name Jessica Mace trips off the tongue, the answer to a crossword puzzle, no doubt. In this age of daily horrors going at ten cents a bushel, what happened to me in Alaska three years ago is ancient enough news to be catalogued alongside floor plans for the Pyramids.

The first thing people ask if they catch me without a turtleneck or a scarf is, Oh my God, what happened to your neck? Then I tell them to go piss up a rope, with a rasp because the blade went deep, and that is inevitably that. We aren't going to discuss it now, either.

Moving on.

I won't give you the entire picture. You can have snapshots. Order them any way you please. Make of them what you will. This is your mystery to solve.

Late one summer I was hitching through Eastern Washington.

Joseph on a camel, *there's* a whole lot of nothing for you. Chatted up a few locals and got the lay of the land. Twigged to the fact that that part of the world rivaled Alaska for incident rates of theft, murder, rape, and diabolism —amateur and professional.

A long-haul trucker who gave me a lift bragged that the meth labs were so prevalent they formed a Crystal Triangle. He worried that the Mexicans were taking over; first wave was migrants working the apple orchards and

now the cartels had their hooks sunk, like in Arizona and Texas. Tourist attractions included the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, Walla Walla State Prison, and the J.W. Trevan Memorial Testing Facility. The first and the last concocted the poison and the middle supplied the control population. Kidding, everybody knew big animal shelters in Seattle and Spokane provided the subjects, forever homes his foot. He offered me a twenty-spot to blow him and I bailed at the weigh station before the wheels stopped rolling.

A farmer and his grandson chided me for thumbing, it wasn't safe for a young lady, insert lecture here. The farmer was aggrieved because somebody poisoned his German shepherd and hacked off its paws. Stole the paws, left the dog. I mean, damn. That bad news was making the rounds. The waitress at the diner where I got dropped by Farmer Brown said it was a shame, the Devil Hisownself at work through the instrument of some godless sicko. *Thirty dogs since Easter,* said the fry cook as he watched me push my cheeseburger aside. *Nuh-uh, eighty or ninety,* chimed in a barfly who was sipping from a brown paper bag at nine in the a.m. *A serial killer of mutts,* said the cook, shaking his head. Pooches snatched from yards and kennels, later found stabbed, decapitated, pierced with arrows, ritually dismembered. *You know what mutilating animals leads to,* said the waitress. *People!* said the barfly and grinned. The sheriff's department was on the case, which meant there'd be three hundred dogs slaughtered before that nimrod Sheriff Danker Brunner caught a clue. Then cookie got going on a rape trial concerning a high school football team the next county over and I tuned my brain to another frequency.

Did some loon think a dog's foot might be a lucky charm? Did he string them from his rearview? Did he mount the heads on the wall of his shack? Did he have a Fido to call his own? Those interstate hookers might want to watch themselves, being a lateral link in the food chain, except nobody cares about hookers the way they get out pitchforks and torches for the plight of mutts.

Rednecks flying Dixie colors from the antenna of their monster truck chucked a bottle at me as I waited for the next hitch at the pull in. Who says you can't go home again. Who says you ever get away.

I danced with a cowboy named Stefano Hoyle at a tavern near the freeway off-ramp. His shirt smelled of Old Spice and tobacco. He possessed an aura reminiscent of the Yukon fishermen and hunters I'd known in the Forty-ninth state. A radioactive strangeness that drew me like a magnet, made me all tingly. Said he'd never been to Alaska, had always lived here in purgatory. Hated the cold and Eastern WA got plenty. He didn't have much more to give, measured his words as if they were pearls. I am a reader between lines kind of gal so we got along dandy.

One Cuervo led to a shitload more Cuervo and we fucked away half the weekend back at his trailer. Basking in the afterglow, I decided to hang around and see where the ride went.

Hoyle didn't ask about the bitchin' scar in his haste to get my clothes off, although he was also pretty goddamned drunk and it was dark, so I figured for sure by the cold light of morning, etcetera, and still not a peep. Tall, dark, and handsome fixed us bacon and toast and I finally became exasperated lounging there in a bra and Hello Kitty panties and told him the score, how I got my throat cut and how I got back my own, or maybe got back *some* of my own, at the end of that spooky fairytale in the frozen north. Real deal fairytales are all about nasty sex, blood, and cannibalism, same as real life. I tend to babble after a righteous fuck, but I possessed the presence of mind to leave out a few details of the incident, such as me busting caps into a dyed-in-the-wool mass murderer. Girl has gotta hold something in reserve for the second date.

He shrugged and tipped his Stetson back and said how'd I like my eggs and then served them to me overdone as steel-belted tires anyway. That Stetson, incidentally, was the only thing he ever wore until five minutes before exiting the trailer to perform his cowboy routine.

Nice enough body, could have made the grade for a young nekkid Marlboro Man calendar in a pinch. It was also obvious that between chain smoking Pall Malls, chugging booze, and taking a beating from the elements, he'd be a woofer in a few more years. Weathered, is the polite term and it's why my policy is to snag them while they're young.

He pulled on a long sleeve shirt and blue jeans and grabbed a rifle from where it rested against a pile of laundry. Flicked me a Gila monster glance

as he limped into the yard. Real deal cowboys, not assholes who wear ten gallon hats and dinner plate belt buckles to the office or while sipping wine coolers, are bowlegged, and *all* of them limp, speak Spanish like it's the mother tongue, and hail from the State of Coahuila. I gave Hoyle a pass on the last item.

When you call out to a real deal cowboy, he turns his body, not his neck. Busted ribs, busted vertebrae, and yeah getting kicked in the face by a bucking bronco smarts. They all chew, or smoke, or both, and they drink. Every mother loving one of them.

His trailer was an Airstream from the '50s. One door. Windows so tiny you'd have to be a rattler to shimmy through. It teetered on cinderblocks, verging that big ass nothing I mentioned earlier. Two acres of empty chicken coops, junk cars, and a pair of corrals taken over by ant mounds. A fire ant colony, the advance guard of a South American invasion force. The barn had collapsed. Country & Western version of the projects. He'd inherited the whole shebang from his folks. Dead for ten years, Mom and Dad; a brother, or sister, in Canada soaking up that sweet, sweet, socialized everything. No pets, pets were a tie down. I looked around at the desolation when he said that, kept my mouth shut for once.

Hoyle proudly showed off his motorcycle, a Kawasaki he'd gotten on the cheap from his pal Lonnie. Did I know anything about motor bikes? Told him my late uncle was a motocross fanatic, took me riding on the Knik Flats when I was a kid, showed me how to tune a carburetor and change a spark plug; the basics. Hoyle seemed impressed with my tomboy ingenuity. His bike had some problems, it stalled and stuttered, and he wasn't exactly a mechanic, although he tinkered with it every chance he got. His cousin died in a motorcycle crackup, rear-ended a semi at highway speed and after divulging that info he changed the subject by not speaking again for half an hour.

Way off through the haze and the hayricks and rough hills were mountains, the ancient worn down kind. The landscape was arrested mid evolution; all the worst qualities of salt plain and high desert and not a tree for miles, frozen like that forever. Could have been tar pits from the look of things, mammoth tusks scattered. Even in hot weather—and Jesus it was hot that year—the dry wind had an edge. The grit between my teeth tasted of alkali

and it was always there, always made me yearn to rinse my mouth. Made me wonder if it was the same phenomena here as on the tundra, if the emptiness treated your mind like a kid deforming a slinky.

I asked where to as he climbed into his old Ford flatbed. Gods, I hated my voice. Sounded like a rusty hinge. Another detail that raised brows, but not his. Unflappable he, I bet a scorpion could scuttle over him and not get a rise. He laid the rifle on the rear window rack and cranked up his rig. Of course the radio was dialed to a station that spun the ghosts of Hank Williams, Roger Miller, and Ernest Tubb.

The roads were either cracked blacktop, dirt, or wagon trails, depending. You traveled in a cloud of dust. I lighted another cigarette and squinted through a pair of sunglasses I'd swiped at a liquor store in Vancouver.

"Last book I read was *Stallion Gate*," Hoyle drawled. A recitation. "Favorite movie is *The Food of the Gods.* You agreed to come home with me because there's something about my eyes." This was in response to a survey question I'd asked at the bar thirty-six hours prior. So it went with him. Drop in a quarter and the music would play sooner or later if you stuck in there.

"Smith's least appreciated book, that movie is terrible, and yeah. You're right on. You've got angel eyes, like Lee Van Cleef." I shifted on the bench seat because the Ka-Bar strapped to my hip was digging in. I'd ditched the .38 since I didn't qualify for a concealed carry permit and none of the cops I'd met had any sense of humor, so a pistol was too risky for my taste. The knife had already earned its keep when a sketchy dude hassled me at a campsite along the Alcan Highway. Scared him off, no slicing necessary. I didn't think Hoyle harbored ill intentions, hoped not. Time would tell. Mr. Ka-Bar gave me a little security anyhow.

"You like to shoot?" he said out of the blue.

The road reeled us further and further into North American badlands variety of veldt. I almost laughed, caught myself, lowered my shades, and gave him a bug-eyed glance that passed for innocence.

"What are we shooting?" I said.

"Sunday's my day of rest," he said. "So, coyotes."

“One thing leads to another.”

“What?”

“It’s not a country song,” I said.

Hoyle parked in the middle of nowhere and we walked to a blind of grass and brush built on the lip of a gully. Perfect three hundred and sixty-degree view of the great empty. Patches of cattle tried to stay in the shade of cloud dapples. Fences between them and us. Corroded barbed wire, petrified posts, rocks, tumbleweeds, lightning-struck charred bones.

He brought a jug of water and a pair of binoculars; decided against the Varmint Suit, as he called it: an olive gray camo set of matching pants and coat; a sniper outfit webbed with netting and faux vegetation. Gave me the chills to see it bundled there by the spare tire like some discarded rubber monster suit from a Universal sound stage. I felt relief that he didn’t climb inside, didn’t strip away his humanity through the addition. The VS was hot and bulky and he saved it for tricky hunts, the kill of kills. Today wasn’t tricky, it was straightforward as she got.

We nestled onto a mat in near darkness of the shelter and peeked through cunning slits in the blind at the bright old world. The blind was one of a dozen he’d erected across the prairie. His custom was to tour them over the course of a season, catch as catch could. Mainly, he strung wire and drove tractors for the neighborhood farmers. This was how he earned tequila and cigarette money. Picking up bitches money, is what he mumbled, or what I heard.

“I don’t think I like this,” I said, quiet as if we were in church.

He told me how it was, laconic, nothing wasted.

Government paid fifty bucks a pelt with a waterproof form to fill in—time, date, sex, method, latitude and longitude, a tiny print wall of other bureaucratic bullshit. The state predator culling program guide claimed winter and spring to be superior to late summer for purposes of controlling the population. Hunters didn’t give a damn. Fifty bucks was fifty bucks and a dead coyote was one less coyote, which was good.

“Predators-schmedators. Everything’s got a right to live,” I said, believing it.

“They eat kittens,” he said.

“Coyotes do not eat kittens. Where the hell do they find kittens?”

“Kittens. Puppies. Lambs and calves. Foals if they can get ’em. You name it. Scarf ’em bloody and bawlin’ out a mama’s womb. Wile E. is a merciless fucker.” He smiled at me and his eyes had a bit of merciless fucker in them too. Made me a teeny bit hot.

“Kittens? Really?”

“A pack went for a baby at a picnic a few years back. A human baby.”

“Ah. This is a noble enterprise. You’re an exterminator. That it?”

“Sure. I guess.”

“You enjoy it so much, I’m kind of surprised you don’t do something about all these fire ant condos.”

He cracked a smile. “Now, that’s not neighborly. They’re getting a foothold this far north. Besides, I don’t get paid to blow up anthills, Jess.”

Normally, Hoyle used electronic decoys and artificial scents and other kinds of high tech bait. Culling was an art and he’d learned everything that he knew from a true master, wouldn’t say who, though. That afternoon he kept it simple with a pocket call. A piece of plastic that created a spectrum of horrendous screeches, squeals, and yowls. Distressed and dying rabbit was his specialty. A scrawny female coyote slunk from the tall grass and froze, nose lifted to get a fix on lunch. He shot her dead at two hundred yards.

We went to the carcass and he dressed it on the spot with a buck knife while the sun hammered and cooked. The slices went A B C. Done it before a thousand times, easy, you could tell. Blood, guts, the works went into a plastic bag and he made his notations of record on the waterproof form. Then back to the truck and a hop, skip, and a jump to another vast quadrant of prairie and a fresh killing blind.

“Next one’s yours,” he said and handed over the rifle.

“No way, Jose,” I said. “I’m not bushwhacking some hapless critter.”

“Oh, yeah you will.”

“Get bent,” I said.

“This is sacred. You’ll offend the gods.”

I worked the bolt to test the action, and maybe to back him off his he-man perch a tad. An ex taught me plenty about shooting, it simply wasn’t my pastime of choice. That said, the rifle, a Ruger .223, was sleek and ultra-phallic. I tasted the linseed and Three-In-One oils on it, whiffed the powder tang from the barrel. The stock fit my shoulder, snug. Deer gun, a woman’s gun.

I shot two males, but made him do the skinning.

It got dark and we knocked off for dinner at that seedy tavern of our initial fateful rendezvous. I compounded my daily quota of moral transgressions by chomping a steak and powering a couple of beers on his tab. Although, much as it pained me to acknowledge, blasting coyotes hadn’t been bad.

In fact, I’d rather enjoyed it, tried to convince myself coyote murder was therapy, if not law of the jungle justice. Doing unto predators who surely did unto the weak and the wounded, and kittens. I am human, thus a justifier of irreconcilable behavior. Therapy, right.

Therapy shouldn’t get the pulse pumping, no. Lining up the trotting coyote in the scope, waiting for the precise instant, then half an exhale, squeezing the trigger, and watching the animal kick over, its slyness no bulletproof shield. Goddess of death, that’s me. We aren’t so far removed from the primitive iterations of our species that slurped blood from the jugular. Like dirty, sleazy sex with a complete stranger, I’d probably hate myself later. As long as my pet cowboy plied me with drinks and physical comfort, that eventuality could be held at bay. I could drown myself in his bad influence and not worry about the bill that was surely coming due.

The waitress, a double dee bimbo, hung on him as floozies will do, called him Steffy and batted her fake lashes to put out a fire. I wondered if he’d fucked her, thought probably, definitely. He went to the men’s room and I caught her in passing, asked how they knew each other, sizing up the competition, I told myself. Flexing the claws, that was it. She gave me a

dead cow stare and said she didn't know my boyfriend, slung him drinks and that didn't mean shit from Shinola, and kept trucking. Busy woman. Bumpkins at every table and bellied to the bar, even on a Sunday night. Her whore purse would be stuffed with folding green by last call and the long walk in the dark to her Pinto at the employee end of the lot.

Hoyle returned with more beer. Sauntered back to the table with more beer, to be accurate. Bar lights backlighted him Travolta style. Best looking dude in the joint that night, maybe every night. His totem animal was something savage and furtive, it watched me from beneath heavy lids.

Expansive with alcohol, I said, "It occurs to me that this dog mutilation spree could be the work of a coyote hunter. Or any kind of hunter."

"What spree?" Hoyle sipped Pabst. His lips were thin and secretive. His lips and his teeth also belonged to the animal.

"The thing. The thing. Ninety dogs, minus heads and paws. A satanic cult or a thrill kill club, according to the yokels. The sensation sweeping the nation."

"Yeah, that. I don't really like dogs very much. Haven't paid attention to the gossip. On your mind, huh?"

"*I* like dogs. A lot."

"Coyotes get no love?"

"Humans have a pact with dogs. You don't break a pact."

"Not particular to them. Not really."

"Humans or dogs?"

"Dogs. Animals. They're filthy."

"It's an unattractive quality in a man."

He smiled, slow and easy. Occurred to me that I wasn't expansive, I was drunk.

"You think I'm stupid. The way you speak to me." He didn't sound mad.

"Shallow. I think you're shallow." The double dee bimbo with her Daisy Dukes and red pumps, the fact he'd had her every which way, provoked my mean streak.

He studied his fingernails. Took a long pull on his brew, wiped his mouth. When he looked at me I saw myself, a pale blur, Casper the Friendly Ghost's sarcastic little sister. "Did you hear they're building a telescope in Hawaii that's more powerful than anything ever invented?"

"Why, no, Steff. I did not." *Steffy* is what nearly escaped.

"Know what they're going to look at with that super-duper telescope?"

"The mother of all telescopes? Let me guess… The stars?"

"The beginning."

"The beginning of what?"

"Of everything."

He poured cheaper than Cuervo tequila all over my skin and lapped it up. No lights, no radio serenade, his breath hot in the hollow of my throat, kissed bruises on my arms, my inner thighs. After, the trailer became cold as a grave and an inkling of the consequences began to sink into my thick skull. Stars blinked through the window slot. Coyotes sang of death and vengeance on the prairie.

Hoyle rolled onto his side. His breathing steadied. I thought he'd fallen asleep when he said in a slurred voice, "It doesn't follow that a coyote hunter is going after dogs. Not a real coyote hunter, I mean." His lighter *snicked* and soon came a slow roll of smoke. That cigarette was almost gone before he finished his thought. "The coyotes are business. This other thing. It's pleasure."

My nakedness became quite acute.

He laid his rough hand on my belly and said, "Considering what you've seen, what you've been through. Maybe you should leave this alone."

The trailer settled. Out there, a breeze moaned and wind chimes clinked to accompany the coyote chorus. All those dead stars shone on.

"This has been waiting for me," I said to him while he snored.

Monday was riding-a-tractor-in-the-back-forty-of-some-hayseed's-ranch-day and Hoyle departed before sunrise. I slept in until the heat made an oven of the Airstream. Glass of warm water from the tap in hand, I explored the property, ducking under withered gray clotheslines, and forging through stunted shrubs, stumps, and earth mounds that disgorged ant convoys that streamed black in the sand. Little biting fuckers were everywhere underfoot. Tried to avoid crushing too many, but you know. That ubiquitous breeze whispered in the grass, fluted through soda bottles arranged as dingy candelabrums made of sticks, rattled the chimes and mussed my hair. The wind chimes were clumped in the petrified grasp of bushes and scrub trees, dozens of them. Metal tinged and pinged and it was almost there for me. Almost. The puzzle squirmed and refused to crystallize.

I got that sense of unfriendly scrutiny, of being the object of a malevolent desire, how the coyote must feel as crosshairs zero in right before its brains are blasted out the other side, yet different, this was all around me, and I ditched the glass and beat it for the trailer, ran no different than the panicked heroine in a horror flick with a chainsaw gunning maniac on her heels. Locked the door and had a breather, fists clenched, heart in spasms, gulping for air. No safer inside, though, I knew that.

Nothing happened and I calmed down, tried the television, got no picture, tried the radio, a scratchy gospel station only, and for a long stretch I sat in a lawn chair, knife balanced on my knee, while dust motes swirled and sweat poured into my socks. I put the knife away and eyed the clutter. Laundry, boxes upon boxes of magazines and Christmas lights and photograph albums, yellow receipts, camping gear, miscellanea.

Better believe I took the opportunity to ransack the place. It didn't amount to anything.

There wasn't a discussion regarding how long I'd stay or what it meant. Hoyle drove into the dark heart of each dawn. I'd smoke my first cigarette while his taillights dwindled. Evenings he'd straggle in from the red haze, caked in range dirt, pockets full of hay and gravel, shower and wolf his supper, down a six pack, collapse, roll onto me to fuck me somewhere along the line. My contribution was to shovel the long neglected barbeque

pit and throw on hamburgers to chase all that beer, and to get fucked. Could have been worse duty and it got me where I wanted to go, or at least it got me closer and closer.

Other nights we hit the tavern.

Weeknights it was just us chickens in a suddenly cavernous hall. *Everybody off hunting Grendel*, I said, curious if he'd get it. With him it was impossible to tell. He was a cold one, my Steffy Hoyle, sharper than he appeared, possibly. No stray emotions. He didn't raise his voice or get overly excited, not even during sex, except I woke from a nightmare of strangulation to hollering and war whooping, the strident whine of an engine, stared out the window and he had that Kawasaki hell bent for leather, headlight drilling a hole into the perfect darkness. Dead drunk, naked but for hat and boots, he shrieked in atavistic joy as he slalomed through the minefield of stumps and gopher holes in the field, revving that bike for crazy as a motherfucker jumps over fallen logs and grassy berms. Crashed it in the yard while cutting donuts. Laid the machine over and it flew fifty or sixty feet, smoked and died. Took some skin off his shins and palms, the bloody mess not quite as bad as it looked. I cleaned him up, picked gravel and bits of grass from the wounds. He didn't flinch, sat stinking of alcohol, legs akimbo, eyes wild, then dull and duller, sank into a stupor, then fell asleep and in the morning it hadn't happened. But it did happen, and several other times, although he managed not to wreck the bike so badly that he needed medical attention. Matter of time. Man with a death wish usually gets what he wants.

Once, we cruised over to his friend Lonnie's house, a shotgun shack not far from the county landfill. Lonnie was a biker, or a biker wannabe, kept a massive Harley in a makeshift carport under a canvas tarp because he didn't have a garage. Guy was brawny and hairy, wore tinted aviator glasses indoors and out. Smelled of hair gel and musk. His fingernails were blacked from getting mashed. Tats and a death metal T shirt. *Death to Tyrants, Death to Infidels, Death to Everybody*. Chained a pair of scarred and muscular pit bulls to the bumper of a truck on blocks. Grizzled brutes with jaws wide enough to crush my head. Sweet as puppies, not a mean bone in them. He didn't appear overly fond of the dogs and they were indifferent to him. Dogs were real friendly toward me, though. Slobbery kisses and paws

to the jaw rough housing and such. I played with them while the boys chatted about riding choppers and hunting and guns. Lonnie also moonlighted as a coyote culler. Birds of a feather, right?

On the ride home I asked if Lonnie fought the dogs, tried to make it sound casual. Hoyle didn't answer. He pressed on the accelerator and drifted into the oncoming lane as we rounded a bend. Needle pegged at eighty. Almost went head to head with a good old boy on a road grader with the blade up. Got to give it to Hoyle—he tapped the brakes and swung us past with inches to spare and his free hand never stopped stroking my leg.

During the second week I dragged a ten-speed from under the trailer where it rusted among abandoned tire rims and sheets of tin siding. A bit of chain oil and wrench work, I got the bicycle fixed right up and I pedaled my ass into town. Hadn't ridden a bike since high school and the six-mile slog nearly precipitated a coronary conclusion. Instant blisters, instant sunburn, steam rose from me in a trailing shadow. I staggered inside the mom and pop on Main Street and drank two quarts of lime Gatorade while Methuselah the Clerk observed my antics with gap-toothed bemusement. Goddamned Gatorade made a snowball in my gut that wanted to ricochet right back out, but I held on, held it down. I hung tough and paid the clerk, smiled sweetly as if my lobster sunburn and chattering teeth weren't nothing but a thing.

I composed myself and moseyed around town for the rest of the afternoon. Youngish female and not terribly unattractive, nobody mistook me for a pervert or a weirdo as they would've if I'd been some bearded, sunbaked dude lurching in off the prairie. People skills, I had them, and most folks were willing to shoot the shit with me as they watered lawns, or washed cars, or slumped in the shade of their porches. I wore my shades and gave everybody a different story, all of them pure baloney. Nobody knew Hoyle, although stoner skateboard kids loitering in the mom and pop parking lot had seen him around, and I'm confident the pancake makeup tarts at the realtor and plumbing supply offices would've gotten misty-eyed at his mention.

A wasted Vietnam vet parked in a wheelchair at the entrance to the Diamond Dee Gentleman's Club panhandling for change knew Lonnie; of course he fought his dogs, Leroy and Gunther, tons of locals did. Pit

fighting was real popular. The veteran owned a collie mix with the softest, saddest brown eyes I ever did see and he covered the dog's ears when he leaned close to confide that the hardcore crowd used house pets and strays as bait for the killer breeds. The bait thing notwithstanding, fighting dogs in gladiatorial exhibitions was innocent, really! Death was rare, usually an ear or an eye got removed at the worst, a lot of yip and yelp signifying nothing, so to speak. The other stuff going down? The dogs piled into sacrificial mounds off route 80, or buried alive in burlap bags down to Stabinham Creek? Now, *that* was insane. Whoever was scragging dogs wholesale was a psycho sonofabitch from the darkest pit of hell and woe unto the sap he eventually turned his knife and arrows against, because sure as horses made little green apples it would come to human butchery. See if it didn't. That assessment seemed to be the consensus and a page three story in the paper confirmed law enforcement, including the FBI, agreed. Whether the feds planned to make it a priority was another matter.

Damned if I knew what I hoped to learn from this shotgun approach to detective work. Definitely I was bored out of my skull, lurking at Hoyle's trailer. Definitely recent life events had activated a recessive sleuthing gene.

I pedaled home. Redness pooled on the horizon.

In a disappointing development, Hoyle and I didn't screw for four nights running. He poured liquor down his throat and fell into a slumber that was as unto death itself. Did not even snore, did not so much as twitch. I began to wonder what was in it for me because my days in that backwater town weren't proving out in any way, shape, or form. I dreamed of old loves lost to shipwreck and mayhem, and I dreamed of dogs I'd known, all of them gone back into the dirt. Dad waved to me from a distance where he stood amid knee-high grass, a warning in his grim smile, the white skull of a cow he raised in his left hand. He'd seldom tried to tell me anything requiring words when I was a hellion child and he didn't now. A golden darkness radiated from him and pushed me into the territory that lies a breath or two on the other side of waking. Erotic nightmares followed. These involved Hoyle, although his face was obscured by the shadow of his hat. After he'd gotten his rocks off he'd shove me from the moving truck, or leap from it

himself, leave me to tumble down a cliff, be consumed in fire. Or I'd emerge unscathed and a piece of the underbrush would detach and come after me, a bear covered in leaves, bits of a shredded net, reared on its hind legs and full of Satan's own desire to fuck me or devour me, one then the other.

I'd emerge into consciousness, aroused and afraid.

With the frustration of one type of lust, the wandering kind crept into my thoughts, had me eyeing the straight shot to the distant highway, phantom engines rumbling, phantom exhaust on my lips, headlights branding an SOS into my frontal lobes. Except, Sunday came around before I got resolved and it was coyote sniping time again.

Hoyle pushed coffee at me, said he hadn't toured this particular zone in several months, then we were in the rig and moving toward a seam of light above the mountains. We didn't talk, not that there was ever much chatter, but this was two-cactuses-on-a-date quiet. The drive was longer than I expected. The road went on and on, degraded from blacktop to gravel, to dirt, to scabbed tracts of bare earth in a sea of bleached grass. Plains spread around us, larger and deeper than the sky. Spectral and wan, gradually acquiring substance like film in an acid bath. Landmarks I'd learned recently were absent or in the wrong direction.

He stopped the truck and shut it off. Reached into a duffel bag and presented me with a rabbit facsimile. Plush and brown, wired to emote vulnerability at various decibels. My task was to pace one hundred steps upwind and set the decoy in play. Once I trotted back we'd find a likely spot with a clear line of fire and settle ourselves to wait. He pecked my forehead by way of dismissal and began to scribble in his culling book. I was tempted to argue, to sneer and inform him he wasn't the bwana of me. Wasn't worth the hassle. I had a hunch I'd get on the highway east any day now, leave this shit-kicker paradise in the rearview. Thus and so.

I trudged into the prairie, sullenly counting paces, each step precisely, more or less, one yard as my Dad the Marine had taught his kiddies. Made the football field-long hike and set the robot rabbit on a log in a patch of sand and weeds. I turned and saw the truck, grill blazing with reflected sunlight, and no sign of Hoyle.

As I approached, I fully expected him to step from behind the opposite side of the cab, shaking the morning dew off his pecker, but he didn't. It became apparent he wasn't crouched in hiding and I came over and tried the doors. Locked tight, no keys in the ignition, no duffle bag with food and water. His rifle was missing from the rack. I shaded my eyes and turned a full circle, scanning for his outline against the blankness. I shouted his name, and in the middle of all this I glanced at the bed of the truck and realized the Varmint Suit wasn't there either. The spit in my mouth dried.

Oh, what goes through a woman's mind at a moment like that.

Instinct kicked in and I went from a standstill to a sprint, six maybe seven strides in a random direction, and did a Supergirl dive. Scratched, bruised, winded, I didn't feel a thing except my heart trying to climb out of my mouth. Those newsreels about trench fighting in World War I, G.I.'s belly-down kissing the dirt as they wriggled under barbed wire? That was me navigating a shallow depression away from the track.

I wormed along until my arms failed. I rolled over and lay still, half covered in swaying grass. Clouds inched past my face. Horses, a hound, Dumbo's lopsided head. A pair of hawks drifted along crosscurrents, wheeling and wheeling. Gnats bit me and I didn't care, my being was consumed with listening for the crunch of footsteps, although I imagined if he spotted me I would hear exactly what the doomed coyote did in its last split second on earth.

A wail rose and fell somewhere to the left. A trilling *eee-ee-eeee* that made my flesh prickle, made me bite my tongue lest I cry a response.

The robot rabbit's sobs described an arc that moved closer, then farther from my hiding place. I considered crawling some more once my arms revived. Too afraid to move, I pissed myself instead, counted down the seconds until the end came brutal as a tomahawk blow to my noggin. Had time to think back on a wasted youth, a life of misdeeds. I contemplated my possibly fatal morbid fascination with things better left alone. Sure, I was furious with myself. Two weeks playing chicken with dark forces, yet never truly admitting I was in over my head. I'd known, always known. The colossal scope of my pride and selfishness bore down to smother me as I bit

hard on the flesh of my arm and tried to keep it together, tried not to whine like prey.

The sky grew dim, then dark. Lightning tore the blackness and thunder cracked a beat or two afterward. The cavewoman running the show in my brain, the primordial bitch dispensing adrenaline and endorphins, knew what I'd listened to throughout the day hadn't been any mechanical rabbit and that almost undid me, almost got the waterworks going.

I sucked it up and stood. Every muscle in me complained and for a few seconds I couldn't bring myself to actually breathe. What Dad and his hunting buddies told me back in the Alaska days was if I felt the bullet, it'd be like a heavy punch. A few seconds of that and it became apparent I wasn't going to be smote from afar.

The truck was gone, probably had been for hours. It began to rain.

Sonofabitch had my purse and knapsack with the spare clothes, the handful of knick-knacks and keepsakes I brought with me when I split from AK. All that shit was in a burn barrel by then, and no, I didn't equivocate or second guess myself, didn't say, *Jess maybe this is a misunderstanding, maybe life has made you a wee bit paranoid*. *Maybe there's a logical explanation*. I was indeed a wee bit paranoid. Thank the gods.

Saving grace was I'd dressed sensibly for the trip. I had my wallet, a pack of Camel No. Nines, and a lighter. I veered due east, walked until lights from a farmhouse appeared, kept going and the clouds rolled back and stars shined upon me. Dawn came and I crossed a rancid stream. Dunked my head underwater, drank until I was fit to puke and rambled on, came to a two lane road I hadn't seen before and followed it back to the highway. Getting dark again. Cleaned up in a gas station john, then walked into a no tell motel one block down and rented a single. Room service pizza and two scalding showers, no booze, but that was fine. Cigarette burns in the carpet, broken box springs, and an ammonia reek was all fine too.

Comatose for eighteen hours with the TV and air-conditioner humming white noise, a chair propped under the doorknob, Mr. Ka-Bar cool against my cheek. Dreamless sleep, except in those moments before I came fully

online again and a misshapen shadow lunged, made a hissing, shushing sound as it trampled the grass. I stabbed it with my knife and poof. The fact I'd doubtless be haunted by that goddamned Varmint Suit until my dying day filled me with the white hot rage men are always being warned about. Could be that's what changed my plans from flight to payback. An old high school enemy called me VH1. Vindictive Hoochie Number One, and she wasn't wrong.

Hopped a ride to the next town with a salesman going to Seattle for a conference. He politely declined to mention the gouges on my face and arms, left me at the off ramp and went his way. Thinking to hell with hitching, I haggled with a kid over the hatchback gathering rust in front of his house. The engine had a million miles on it and sounded iffy and the tires were screwed to hell. Good thing that jalopy only had to get me down the road a state or two. Better would come along. I paid three hundred cash and put a lie on the receipt. Kid was so stoned I doubt he even knew I was a woman, much less be able to ID me if it came to such a pass.

As for where I got the dough, listen. Just because I enjoyed pilfering stores for sundries didn't mean I was destitute. *People Magazine* once gave me sixty grand for an interview they pared to three and half sentences and a muddy headshot. I socked that shit away.

I bought basic camping gear at a sporting goods store and spent four nights on the grounds of a state park, four more along a big river where it didn't feel as if anybody would notice. On the ninth day I parked in a gravel pit a half mile from Hoyle's trailer, sneaked closer for recon. He wasn't around. I proceeded with caution, stealthy as any woodland critter, and let myself in. Forty-five minutes on the property was forty more than necessary. Did what needed doing and got the hell out and drove to another motel, a nicer setup, and treated myself to an evening on a soft bed and half a bottle of red wine.

Swung back to check on him late the next afternoon. Hoyle's truck sat in the yard. I glassed the property with a pair of binoculars, gave it an hour before moving in. My ex-lover lay behind the trailer, sprawled face down, stark staring naked except for his boots. Nearby, his bike was a crumpled mess of spokes and leaking fluids. The results were certainly more spectacular than I'd hoped for while sawing through the brake lines.

I poked him with a stick, unsure whether he was dead or playing possum. Neither, as it developed. Rolled him over and he smiled at me, teeth stained with grass and dirt. His arms worked, but that was it. I didn't see any marks beyond some bumps and abrasions. Whatever was wrong with him, I bet he'd be fine with proper medical attention.

"Hi, darling," he said. "You had me worried, runnin' off like that."

I squatted and hooked under his armpits and lifted, began to shuffle backward. His legs bumped along lifelessly. Went a few steps, rested, and repeated. I dragged him into the nearer of the two corrals and propped him in a seated position, his spine braced by a post. He didn't say anything the whole time except to ask for his Stetson because the sun was powerful warm on his neck. I fetched the hat and gave it to him. An ant climbed atop the toe of my boot, another clung to my pants cuff. I bent and brushed them aside, moved my feet to discourage the rest. Hoyle stared at the looming mound, its teeming inhabitants. The breeze stirred.

"Why?" he said, as if genuinely curious.

I strode to a dead dogwood and tore free the chimes strung in its branches, flung the mess at Hoyle. He snatched it midflight, glanced at the handful of dog tags—rabies vaccinations and ID platelets—and nodded. Dozens upon dozens more clinked in their constellations on bushes, posts, clothes lines, woven into the trailer vents, every fucking where. I let him think about it while I used a branch to cover my tracks, the grooves where I'd towed him.

"Don't you think the cops will put it together? They'll catch you, Jess."

"I hear Sheriff Brunner is a dumbass," I said.

"Yeah. It's true enough."

Daylight was burning and restlessness overcame me. I gave the old boy a sip from my water bottle and tried to think of the proper words, settled for a goodbye kiss, quick and dry. We didn't say anything for the longest time and eventually I turned and walked away.

I looked over my shoulder as I crested a rise that led to the road. Hoyle reached forward and passed the Stetson over his legs, back and forth.

On the way through town to wherever, I stopped bold as brass at Lonnie's house. There was a bad moment where I worried Gunther and Leroy might've forgotten, had visions of getting rent limb from limb as I knelt to unleash them from the bumper of the truck. Not a chance. And when I popped the hatch, those bruisers piled into the back like they'd always belonged there.

We hit the highway eastbound, ascended into the hills and then the mountains. Kept right on going, flying.

The car eventually crapped out in Idaho. I spent a time with a reverend and his family on what had been a potato farm until the latter '70s. God works in mysterious ways, so said the right reverend. He'd lost a pair of mastiffs to old age and cancer respectively. His kids fell in love with Leroy and Gunther. I left the dogs in their care when I slipped away one night by the dark of the moon. Headed east across the fallow fields with a knife, backpack, and a pocket Bible I lifted from the reverend's shelf. I'd hollowed out that good book. It's where I stashed my possibles.

Camped in the lee of an abandoned barn, I rolled over onto a black widow. Little bitch stabbed the living shit out of me. Sorry, so very sorry that I crushed her in my thrashing. Spent two days curled tight, my guts clenched into a slimy ball. In my delirium I chewed dirt and fantasized about being skinned alive. Laid my bottom dollar on dying out there in that lonely field.

I didn't die. Nah, I did what I always do. I got over it.

Termination Dust

This version taken from *Tales of Jack The Ripper*, 2013
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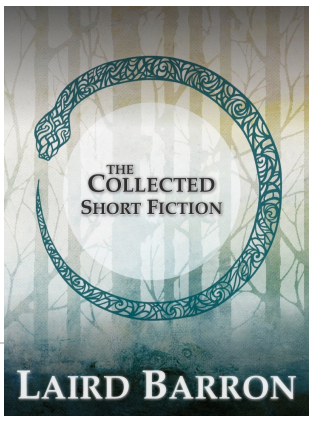


Let be be finale of seem.
—Wallace Stevens

Hunting in Alaska, especially as one who enjoys the intimacy of knives, bludgeons, and cords, is fraught with peril. Politically speaking, the difference between a conservative and a liberal in the forty-ninth state is the caliber of handgun one carries. Le sigh. Despite a couple of close calls, you've not been shot. Never been shot, never been caught, knock on wood.

That's what you used to say, in any event.

People look at you every day. People look at you every day, but they don't see you. People will ask why and you will reply, Why not?

Tyson Langtree's last words: "I tell you, man. Andy Kaufman is alive, man. He's alive, bigger than shit, and cuttin' throats. He's Elvis, man. He's the king of death." This was overheard at the packed Caribou Creek Tavern on a Friday night about thirty seconds before bartender Lonnie DeForrest tossed his sorry ass out onto a snowbank. Eighteen below zero Fahrenheit and a two and a half mile walk home. Dead drunk, wearing coveralls and a Miners Do It Deeper *ball cap.*

Nobody's seen the old boy since. Deputy Newcastle found a lot of blood in Langtree's bed, though. Splattered on the walls and ceiling of his shack on Midnight Road. Hell of a lot of blood. That much blood and no corpse, well, you got to wonder, right? Got to wonder why Langtree didn't just keep his mouth shut. Everybody knows Andy Kaufman is crazy as a motherfucker. He been whacking motormouth fools since '84.

You were in the bar that night and you followed Langtree back to his humble abode. Man, he was surprised to see you step from the shadows.

For the record, his last words were actually, "Please don't kill me, E!"

Jessica Mace lies in darkness, slightly drunk, wholly frustrated. Heavy bass thuds through the ceiling from Snodgrass' party. She'd left early and in a huff after locking horns with Julie Vellum, her honorable enemy since the hazy days of high school. Is hate too strong an emotion to describe how she feels about Julie? Nope, hatred seems quite perfect, although she's long since forgotten why they are at eternal war. Vellum—what kind of name is that, anyhow? It describes either ancient paper or a sheepskin condom. The bitch is ridiculous. Mobile home trash, bottom drawer sorority sister, tits sliding toward earth with a vengeful quickness. Easiest lay of the Last Frontier. A whore in name and deed.

JV called *her* a whore and splashed a glass of beer on her dress. Cliché bitch, so very cliché Obviously JV hadn't gotten the memo that Jessica and Nate were through as of an hour prior to the party. The evil slut had carried a torch for him since he cruised into town with his James Dean too-cool-for-school shtick and set all the girlies' hearts aflutter a few weeks before the Twin Towers crumbled a continent away.

Snodgrass, Wannamaker, and Ophelia, the beehive-hairdo lady from 510, jumped between them before the fur could fly. Snodgrass was an old hand at breaking up fistfights. Lucky for Julie, too. Jessica made up her mind to fix that girl's wagon once and for all, had broken a champagne glass for an impromptu weapon when Snodgrass locked her in a bear hug. Meanwhile, Deputy Newcastle stood near the wet bar, grimly shaking his huge blond head. Or it might've been the deputy's evil twin, Elam. Hard to tell through the crush of the crowd, the smoke, and the din. If she'd seen him with his pants down, she'd have known with certainty.

Here she is after the fracas, sulking while the rest of town let down its hair and would continue to do so deep into the night. Gusts from the blizzard shake the building. Power comes from an emergency generator in the basement. However, cable is on the fritz. She would have another go at

Nate, but Nate isn't around, he is gone-Johnson after she'd told him to hit the bricks and never come back no more, no more. Hasty words uttered in fury, a carbon copy of her own sweet ma who'd run through half the contractors and fishermen in the southeast during a thirty-year career of bar fights and flights from the law. Elizabeth Taylor of the Tundra, Ma. Nate, an even poorer man's Richard Burton. Her father, she thought of nevermore.

Why hadn't Nate been at the party? He *always* made an appearance. Could it be she's really and truly broken his icy heart? Good!

She fumbles in the bedside drawer, pushing aside the cell charger, Jack's photograph, the revolver her brother Elwood gave her before he got shredded by a claymore mine in Afghanistan, and locates the "personal massager" she ordered from Fredericks of Hollywood and has a go with that instead. Stalwart comrade, loyal stand-in when she's between boyfriends and lovers, Buzz hasn't let her down yet.

Jessica opens her eyes as the mattress sags. A shadow enters her blurry vision. She smells cologne or perfume or hairspray, very subtle and totally androgynous. Almost familiar. Breathless from the climax it takes her a moment to collect her wits.

She says, "Jack, is that you?" Which was a strange conclusion, since Jack presumably drifts along deep sea currents, his rugged redneck frame reduced to bones and sweet melancholy memories. All hands of the *Prince Valiant* lost to Davy Jones's locker, wasn't it? That makes three out of the four main men of her life dead. Only Nate is still kicking. Does he count now that she's banished him to a purgatory absent her affection?

Fingers clamp her mouth and ram her head into the pillow hard enough that stars shoot everywhere. Her mind flashes to a vivid image: Gothic oil paintings of demons perched atop the bosoms of swooning women. So morbidly beautiful, those antique pictures. She thinks of the pistol in the dresser that she might've grabbed instead of the vibrator. Too late baby, too late now.

A knife glints as it arcs downward. Her attacker is dressed in black so the weapon appears to levitate under its own motive force. The figure slashes her throat with vicious inelegance. An untutored butcher. It is cold and she tastes the metal. But it doesn't hurt.

Problem is, constant reader, you can’t believe a damned word of this story. The killer could be anyone. Cops recovered some bodies reduced to charcoal briquettes. Two of those charred corpses were never properly identified, and what with all the folks who went missing prior to the Christmas party…

My life flashed before my eyes as I died of a slashed throat and a dozen other terrible injuries. My life, the life of countless others who were in proximity. Wasn’t pretty, wasn’t neat or orderly, or linear. I experienced the fugue as an exploding kaleidoscope of imagery. Those images replay at different velocities, over and over in a film spliced together out of sequence. My hell is to watch a bad horror movie until the stars burn out.

I get the gist of the plot, but the nuances escape into the vacuum. The upshot being that I know hella lot about my friends and neighbors; just not everything. Many of the juiciest details elude me as I wander Purgatory, reliving a life of sin. Semi-omniscience is a drag.

In recent years, some pundits have theorized I was the Eagle Talon Ripper. Others have raised the possibility it was Jackson Bane, that he’d been spotted in San Francisco months after the Prince Valiant went down, that he’d been overheard plotting bloody revenge against me, Jessica, a dozen others. Laughable, isn’t it? The majority of retired FBI profilers agree.

Nah, I’m the hot pick these days. Experts say the trauma I underwent in Moose Valley twisted my mind. Getting shot in the head did something to my brain. Gave me a lobotomy of sorts. Except instead of going passive, I turned into a monster, waited twenty-plus years, and went on a killing spree.

It’s a sexy theory what with the destroyed and missing bodies, mine included. The killer could’ve been a man or woman, but the authorities bet on a man. Simple probability and the fact some of the murders required a great deal of physical strength and a working knowledge of knots and knives. I fit the bill on all counts. There’s also the matter of my journal. Fragments of it were pieced together by a forensics team and the shit in there could be misconstrued. What nobody knows is that after the earlier

event in Moose Valley, I read a few psychology textbooks. The journal was just therapy, not some veiled admission of guilt. Unfortunately, I was also self-medicating with booze and that muddied the waters even more.

Oh, well. What the hell am I going to do about it now?

If you ask me, Final Girl herownself massacred all those people. What's my proof? Nothing except instinct. Call me a cynic—it doesn't seem plausible a person can survive a gashed throat and still possess the presence to retrieve a pistol, in the dark, no less, and plug the alleged killer to save the day. How convenient that she couldn't testify to the killer's identity on account of the poor lighting. Even more convenient how that fire erased all the evidence. In the end, it's her word, her version of events.

Yeah, it's a regular cluster. Take the wrong peg from this creaky narrative and the whole log pile falls on you. Nonetheless, you know. You know.

What if… What if they were in it together?

Nights grow long in the tooth. A light veil of snow descends the peaks. Termination dust, the sourdoughs call it. You wait and watch for signs. Geese fly backwards in honking droves, south. Sunsets flare crimson, then fade to black as fog rolls over the beach. People leave the village and do not return. A few others never left but are gone just the same. They won't be returning either.

The last of the cruise ships migrated from Eagle Talon on Saturday. The Princess Wing blared klaxons and horns and sloshed up the channel in a shower of streamers and confetti, its running lights blazing holes through the mist. A few hardy passengers in red and yellow slickers braved the drizzle to perch along the rails. Some waved to the dockworkers. Others cheered over the rumble of the diesels. Seagulls bobbed aloft, dark scraps and tatters against the low clouds that always curtain this place.

You mingled with the people on the dock and smiled at the birds, enjoying their faint screams. Only animals seem to recognize what you are. You hate them too. That's why you smile, really. Hate keeps you warm come the freeze.

Ice will soon clog the harbor. Jagged mountains encircle the village on three sides in a slack-jawed Ouroboros. The other route out of town is a two-mile tunnel that opens onto the Seward Highway. This tunnel is known as the Throat. Anchorage lies eighty miles north, as the gull flies. Might as well be the moon when winter storms come crashing in on you. Long-range forecasts call for heavy snow and lots of wind. There will come a day when all roads and ways shall be impassable.

You've watched. You've waited. Salivated.

You'll retreat into the Estate with the sheep. It's a dirty white concrete superstructure plonked in the shadow of a glacier. Bailey Frazier & Sons built the Frazier Estate Apartments in 1952 along with the Frazier Tower that same year. History books claim these were the largest buildings in Alaska for nearly three decades, and outside of the post office, cop shop, library, little red schoolhouse, the Caribou Tavern, and a few warehouses, that's it for the village proper. Both were heavily damaged by the '64 quake and subsequent tsunami. Thirteen villagers were swept away on the wave. Four more got crushed in falling debris. The Tower stands empty and ruined to this day, but the Estate is mostly functional; a secure, if decrepit, bulwark against the wilderness.

You are an earthquake, a tidal wave, a mountain of collapsing stone, waiting to happen. You are the implacable wilderness personified. What is in you is ancient as the black tar between stars. A void that howls in hunger and mindless antipathy against the heat of the living.

Meanwhile, this winter will be business as usual. Snowbirds flee south to California and Florida while the hardcore few hunker in dim apartments like animals in burrows and play cribbage or video games, or gnaw yourselves bloody with regret. You'll read, and drink, and fuck. Emmitt Snodgrass will throw his annual winter gala. More drinking and even more fucking, but with the sanction of costume and that soul-warping hash Bobby Aickman passes around. By spring, the survivors will emerge, pale as moles, voracious for light as you are for the dark.

With the official close of tourist season, Eagle Talon population stands at one hundred and eighty-nine full-time residents. Three may be subtracted

from that number, subtracted from the face of the earth, in fact, although nobody besides the unlucky trio and you know anything about that.

Dolly Sammerdyke. Regis and Thora Lugar. And the Lugars' cat, Frenchy. The cat died hardest of them all. Nearly took out your eye. Maybe that will come back to haunt you. The devil's in the…

Elam Newcastle is interviewed by the FBI at Providence Hospital. He has survived the Frazier Estate inferno with second degree burns and frostbite of his left hand. Two fingers may have to be amputated and the flesh of his neck and back possess the texture of melted wax. In total, a small price to pay considering the hell-on-Earth-scenario he's escaped. His New Year's vow is to find a better trade than digging ditches.

He tells the suit what he knows as the King of Pop hovers in the background, partially hidden by curtains and shadows. This phantom, or figment, has shown up regularly since the evening of the massacre at the Estate. Elam is not a fan and doesn't understand why he's having this hallucination of the singer grinning and gesticulating with that infamous rhinestone-studded glove. It is rather disturbing. Doubly disturbing since it's impossible to attribute it to the codeine.

The investigator blandly reveals how the local authorities have recently found Elam's twin brother deceased in the Frazier Tower. It was, according to the account, a gruesome spectacle, even by police standards. The investigator describes the scene in brief, albeit vivid, detail.

Elam takes in this information, one eye on the moonwalking apparition behind the FBI agent. Finally, he says, "Whaddaya mean they stole his hat?"

Scenes from an apocalypse:

Viewed from the harbor, Eagle Talon is an inkblot with a steadily brightening dot of flame at its heart. The Frazier Estate Apartments have been set ablaze. Meanwhile, the worst blizzard to hit Alaska since 1947 rages on. Flames leap from the upper stories, whipped by the wind. Window

glass shatters. Fire, smoke, and driving snow boil off into outer darkness. That faint keening is either the shrieks of the damned as they roast in the penthouse, or metal dissolving like Styrofoam as the inferno licks it to ash. Or both.

Men and women in capes and masks, gossamer wings and top hats, mill in the icy courtyard. Their shadows caper in the bloody glare. They are the congregants of a frigid circle of Hell, summoned to the Wendigo's altar. They join hands and begin to waltz. Flakes of snow and ash cover them, bury them.

The angry fire is snapping yellow. Pull farther out into the cold and the dark and fire becomes red through the filter of the blizzard, then shivers to black. Keep pulling back until there are no stars, no fire, no light of any kind. Only the snow sifting upward from the void to fill the world with silence and sleep.

We make love with the lights off. The last time, I figure. She calls me Jack when she comes and probably has no idea. Jackson Bane died on the Bering Sea two winters gone. His ghost makes itself known. He knocks stuff over to demonstrate he's unhappy, like when I'm fucking his former girlfriend. Not hard to imagine him raving impotently behind the wall of sleep, working himself toward a splendorous vengeance. Perhaps that makes him more of a revenant.

My name is Nathan Custer. I fear the sea. Summertime sees me guiding tours on the glacier for Emmitt Snodgrass. Winter, I lie low and collect unemployment. Cash most of those checks down at the Caribou. Laphroaig is my scotch of choice and it's a choice I make every livelong day, and twice a day once snow flies. Hell of an existence. I fought with Jack at Emmitt Snodgrass' annual winter party in '07. Blacked his eye and demolished a coffee table. Don't even recall what precipitated the brawl. I only recall Jessica in a white tee and cotton shorts standing there with a bottle of Lowenbrau in her hand. Snodgrass forgave me the mess. We never patched it up, Jack and I.

Too late, now. Baby, it's too late.

While Jessica showers, I prowl her apartment naked, peering into cupboards and out the window at snowflakes reflected in a shaft of illumination pitched by the twin lamps over the lobby foyer. Ten feet beyond the Estate wall lies a slate of nothingness. Depending on the direction, it's either sea ice and, eventually, open black water, or mountains. This is five-oh-something in the p.m., December. Sun has been down for half an hour.

"What are you doing?" Jessica, head wrapped in a towel, strikes a Venus pose in the bathroom doorway. The back-lighting lends her a halo. She's probably concerned about the butcher knife I pulled from the cutlery block. Wasn't quick enough to hide it behind my leg. Naked guy with a knife presents an environmental hazard even if you don't suspect him of being a homicidal maniac, which she might.

"Getting ready for the party," I say, disingenuous as ever.

"Yeah, you look ready." She folds her arms. She thinks I've been using again; it's in her posture. "What the hell, Nate?"

Unfortunately for everyone, I'm not an outwardly articulate man. I'm my father's son. Mom didn't hate his guts because he slapped her at the '88 Alaska State Fair; she hated him because he refused to argue. When the going got shouty, Dad was a walker-awayer. I realize, here in my incipient middle age, that his tendency to clam up under stress wasn't from disrespect. He simply lost his ability to address the women in his life coherently.

"Uh," is what I come up with. Instead of, *Baby, I heard a noise. Somebody was trying the door. Swear to God, I saw the knob jiggle.* I don't have the facility to ask her, *If I was jacked up, wouldn't you have noticed it while we were in bed?* More than anything, I want to tell her of my suspicions. Something is terribly wrong in our enclave. People are missing. Strange shadows are on the move and I have a feeling the end is near for some of us.

"Jesus. Cal's right. He's right. The bastard is right. My god."

"Cal's right? He's not right. What did he say?" Add Building Superintendent Calvin Wannamaker to my little black book of hate. I grip

the knife harder, am conscious of my oversized knuckles and their immediate ache. Arthritis, that harbinger of old age and death, nips at me.

"Hit the road, Jack." She points the Finger of Doom, illustrating where I should go. Presumably Hell lies in that general direction.

Maybe I can bulldoze through this scene. "That makes twice you called me Jack today. We have to get ready for the party. Where the hell are my pants?" I look everywhere but directly into the sun that is her gaze.

"You've lost your damned mind," she says in a tone of wonderment, as if waking from a long, violent dream and seeing everything for how it really is. "You need to leave."

"The party. My pants."

"Find another pair. Goodbye. And put that back. It was a present. From Jack!" She's hollering now.

"Wait a second… Are you and Cal—"

"Shut your mouth and go."

I put the cleaver in the block, mightily struggling to conjure the magic words to reverse the course of this shipwreck. This isn't love, but it's the best thing I've had in recent memory. No dice. Naked guy hurled from the nest by his naked girlfriend. This is trailer park drama. Julie Vellum will cream over the details once the gossip train gets chugging. Maybe, just maybe, I'll throw a fuck into her. Ah, sweet revenge, hey? The prospect doesn't thrill me, for some reason. I walk into the hall and lurk there awhile, completely at a loss. I press the buzzer twice. Give up when there's no answer, and start the long, shameful trudge to my apartment.

The corridors of the Estate are gloomy. Tan-paneled walls and muddy recessed lights spaced far enough apart it feels like you're walking along the bottom of a lake. The effect is heightened due to the tears in my eyes. By the time I get to the elevator, I'm freezing. The super keeps this joint about three degrees above an ice-locker.

"Nate!" The whisper is muted and sexless. A shadow materializes from behind the wooden statue of McKinley Frazier that haunts this end of the fifth floor. It's particularly murky here because the overhead has been

busted. A splinter of glass stabs my bare foot. I'm hopping around, trying to cover my balls and also act naturally.

"Nate, hold still, pal." Still whispering. Whoever it is, they're in all black and they've got a hammer.

Oh, wait, I recognize this person. I'm convinced it's impossible that this could be happening to me for the second time in twenty years. This isn't even connected to that infamous Moose Valley slaughter. It's like winning top prize in a sweepstakes twice in one's lifetime. Why me, oh gods above and below? I'm such a likeable guy. Kurt Russell wishes he was as handsome as I am. So much to live for. Living looks to be all done for me.

The hammer catches the faint light. It gleams and levitates.

"What are you going to do with that?" I say. It's a rhetorical question.

Jessica Mace can't actually speak when the feds interview her. She's still eating through tubes. The wound at her neck missed severing the carotid by a millimeter. She scribbles curt responses to their interrogation on a portable whiteboard. Her rage is palpable, scarcely blunted by exhaustion and painkillers.

Ma'am, after this individual assaulted you in bed, what happened?

Came to. Choking on blood. Alive. Grabbed gun. Heard noises from living room. The killer had someone in a chair and was torturing them.

Who was in the chair?

Nate Custer.

Nathan Custer?

I think so. Yes.

Did you see the suspect's face?

No.

Approximately how tall was the suspect?

I don't know. Was dark. Was bleeding out. Confused.

Right. But you saw something. And you discharged your firearm.

Yes. It was him. I’m sure.

Him?

Him, her. The killer. My vision was blurry. They were a big, fuzzy shadow.

Are you admitting that you fired your weapon multiple times at… at a shadow?

No. I shot a goddamned psycho five times and killed him dead. You’re welcome.

How can you be certain, Ms. Mace?

Maybe I can’t. Killer could’ve been anyone. Could be anyone. The doctor. The nurse. Maybe it was you. YOU look fucking suspicious.

Calvin Wannamaker and his major domo Hendricks are bellied up to the bar at the Caribou Tavern for their weekly confab. They’ve already downed several rounds.

DeForrest is polishing glasses and watching the new waitress’s skirt cling in exactly the right places as she leans over table No. 9 to flirt with big Luke Tucker. Tucker is a longshoreman married to a cute young stay-at-home mom named Gladys. Morphine is playing “Thursday” on the jukebox while the village’s resident Hell’s Angel, Vince Diamond, shoots pool against himself. VD got paroled from Goose Bay Correctional Facility last month. He has spent nineteen of his forty-eight years in various prisons. His is the face of an axe murderer. His left cheek is marred by a savage gash, freshly scabbed. Claims he got the wound in a fight with his newest old lady. Deputy Newcastle has been over to their apartment three times to make peace.

The bar is otherwise unoccupied.

“Found a dead cat in the bin.” Wannamaker lights a cigarette. A Winston. It’s the brand that he thinks best suits his Alaska image. He prefers Kools, alas. “Neck was broke, eyes buggin’ out. Gruesome.” The super loves cats. He keeps three Persians in his suite on the first floor. He’s short and thin and wears a round bushy beard and plaid sweaters, or if it’s a special occasion, black turtlenecks. Hendricks started calling him “Cat Piss Man’

behind his back and the name kind of stuck. Neither man was born in Alaska. Wannamaker comes from New York, Hendricks from Illinois. They've never adjusted to life on the frontier. They behave like uneasy foreigners in their own land.

"Oh, yeah?" Hendricks says with a patent couldn't-give-a-shit less tone. No cat lover, Hendricks. Don't like cats, love pussy, he's been quoted time and again. He's taller than Wannamaker, and broad-shouldered. Legend says he worked for the Chicago Outfit before he got exiled to Alaska. Everyone considers him a goon and that's a fairly accurate assessment.

"Floyd found it, I guess is what I mean," Wannamaker says.

Floyd is the chief custodian and handyman for the Estate. He was also a train-hopping hobo for three decades prior to landing the Estate gig.

"The hell was Floyd doing in the bin?"

"Makin' a nest. Divin' for pearls. I dunno. He found a dead cat is all I know. Thinks it belonged to the Lugars. They split ten days ago. Must a been in a rush, cause they locked their doors and dropped the keys in my box without so much as a by your leave. Earlier and earlier every year, you know that? I don't get why they even make the trip anymore. I get three or four calls a day, people looking for an apartment. At least."

Hendricks sips his beer. He doesn't say anything. He too is checking out the posterior of Tammy, the new girl.

"Yeah, exactly." Wannamaker nods wisely in response to some ghost of a comment. "I hate snowbirds. Hate. Too cheap to pack their old cat and ship him to Florida. What's Lugar do? Snaps the poor critter's neck and dumps him in the garbage. Bah. Tell you what I'm gonna do, I'm gonna file a report with Newcastle. Sic the ever lovin' law on that sick jerk. Shouldn't have a cat. If he didn't own his apartment I'd yank his lease faster than you can spit."

Hendricks pushes his bottle aside. "That's a weird story."

"Lugar's a weird dude. He sells inflatable dolls and whatcha call 'em, body pillows."

"Is that what he does?"

“Oh, yeah, man. He flies to Japan every so often and wines and dines a bunch of CEOs in Tokyo. They’re nuts for that stuff over there.”

“Huh. I figured he’d be retired. Guy’s gotta be pushing seventy.”

“I guess when you love what you do it ain’t work.”

Words to live by.

Last words of Mark Ferro, aged thirty-three as he is executed by lethal injection for a homicide unrelated to the Frazier Estate Massacre: “It was meeeeeee!”

You’ve exercised a certain amount of restraint prior to the blizzard. That’s over. Now, matters will escalate. While everybody else has gathered upstairs for Snodgrass’ annual bash, you sneak away to share a special moment with Nathan Custer.

Does it hurt when I do this? It’s a rhetorical question.

You don’t expect Custer can hear you after you popped his eardrums with a slot screwdriver. Can’t see you either. Blood pumps from the crack in his skull. Smack from a ball peen hammer took the starch right out of our hero. He coughs bubbles. Don’t need tongue or teeth to blow bubbles, though it helps.

It may not even be Custer under that mask of gore. Could be Deputy Newcastle or Hendricks. Shit, could be that arrogant little prick Wannamaker at this rate. True story, you’ve fantasized about killing each of them so often that the lines might well be erased.

Except, haven’t you wanted to end your existence? Sure you have. You’d love nothing more than to take your own miserable head off with a cleaver, string your own guts over the tree the way those cheap Victorian saps strung popcorn before Christmas went electric.

This is where it gets very, very confusing.

For a lunatic moment you’re convinced it’s you, slumped there, mewling like a kitten, soul floating free and formless while an angel of vengeance

goes to work on your body with hammer and tongs. Yeah, maybe it's you in the chair and Custer, or Newcastle, or Wannamaker, has been the killer all along. It ain't pretty, having one's mind blown like this.

You were certain it was Custer when you put him in the chair, but that was a long time ago. So much has changed since then. The continents have drifted closer together, the geography of his features has altered for the worse. It's gotten dark. There's the storm and your sabotage of the reserve generator to thank. You've gathered wool and lost the plot. Can't even remember why you'd reserve special tortures for this one.

Why are your hands so fascinating all of the sudden?

Oh, Jesus, what if Snodgrass spiked the punch? He'd once threatened to dose his party-goers with LSD. Nobody took him seriously. But, what if? That would explain why the darkness itself has begun to shine, why your nipples are hard as nail-heads, why you've suddenly developed spidey-sense. Oh, Emmitt Snodgrass, that silly bastard; his guts are going to get extracted through his nose, and soon.

You detect the creak of a loose board and turn in time to see a snub-nosed revolver extending from a crouched silhouette. A lady's gun, so sleek and petite. Here's a flash of fire from the barrel that reveals the bruised face of the final girl. Don't she know you're invulnerable to lead? Didn't she read the rules inside the box top? Problem is, it's another sign that your version of reality is shaky, because you are sure as hell that you killed her already. Sliced her throat, ear to lovely ear. Yet, here she is, blasting you into Kingdom Come with her itty bitty toy pistol. What the fuck is up with that?

Double tap. Triple, dipple, quadruple tap. Bitch ain't taking any chances, is she? You're down, sprawled next to your beloved victim, whoever he is. Your last. The final girl done seen to that, hasn't she?

Custer, is that you? you ask the body in the chair. He don't give anything away, only grins at you through the blood. Luckily you're made of sterner stuff. Four bullets isn't the end. You manage to get your knees and elbows underneath you for a lethal spring in the penultimate frame of the flick of your life, the lunge where you take the girl into your arms and squeeze until her bones crack and her tongue protrudes. When you're done, you'll crawl

away to lick your wounds and plot the sequel. Four shots ain't enough to kill the very beating heart of evil.

Turns out, funny thing, the final girl has one more bullet. She hobbles over and puts it in your head.

Well, shit—

"Christ on a pony, what are you *dooo-ing*?" This plaintive utterance issues from Eliza Overstreet's ripe mouth. She's dressed as a cabaret dancer or Liza Minnelli, or some such bullshit. White, white makeup and sequins and tights. A tight, tight wig cropped as a Coptic monk's skullcap. All *sparkly*.

Emmitt Snodgrass cackles, and pops another tab of acid. The rest of the batch he crushes into the rich red clot of punch in a crystal bowl shaped as a furious eagle. The furious eagle punch bowl is courtesy of Luke Tucker, collector of guns, motorcycles, and fine crystal. The suite is prepared—big Christmas tree, wall-to-wall tinsel, stockings and disco balls hung with care. Yeah, Snodgrass is ready for action, Jackson.

Eliza gives him a look. "Everybody is going to drink that!"

He grabs her ass and gives it a comforting squeeze. "Hey, hey, baby. Don't worry. This shit is perfectly safe to fry."

"But it's all we've got, you crazy sonofabitch!"

The doorbell goes ding-dong and the first guests come piling in from the hallway. It will be Bob Aickman, bare-assed and goggle-eyed on acid, who will eventually trip over the wires that cause the electrical short that starts the tragic fire that consumes the top three floors of the Estate.

Deputy Newcastle operates two official vehicles: an eleven-year-old police cruiser with spider web cracks in the windshield and a bashed in passenger side door, and an Alpine snowmobile that, by his best estimate, was likely manufactured during the 1980s. Currently, he's parked in the cruiser on Main Street across from the condemned hulk that is the Frazier Tower. The sun won't set for another forty-five minutes, give or take, but already the shadows are thick as his wife's blueberry cobbler. It's snowing and blowing.

Gusts rock the car. He listens to the weather forecast. Going to be cold as hell, as usual. Twenty-seven degrees Fahrenheit and sinking fast. He unscrews the thermos and has a sip of cocoa Hannah packed in his lunchbox. Cocoa, macaroni salad and a tuna sandwich on white bread. He loathes macaroni and tuna, loves cocoa, and adores dear Hannah, so it's a wash.

His beat is usually quiet. The geographic jurisdiction extends from the village of Eagle Talon to a fourteen-mile stretch north and south along the Seward Highway. Normally, he deals with drunks and domestic arguments, tourists with flat tires and the occasional car accident.

Then along came this business with Langtree and the slaughterhouse scene at his shack on Midnight Road. A forensics team flew in from Anchorage and did their thing, and left again. Deputy Newcastle still hasn't heard anything from headquarters. Nobody's taking it seriously. Langtree was a nut. Loons like him are a dime a dozen in Alaska. Violence is part of the warp and woof of everyday existence here. Takes a hell of a lot to raise eyebrows among the locals. The deputy is worried, and with good reason. The angel on his shoulder keeps whispering in his ear. The angel warns him a blood moon is on the rise.

Despite the fact his shift ended at three o'clock, Deputy Newcastle has spent the better part of an hour staring at the entrance of the abandoned Frazier Tower. Should have gotten leveled long ago, replaced by a hotel or a community center, or any old thing. Lord knows the village could use some recreational facilities. Instead, the building festers like a rotten tooth. It's a nest for vermin—animals and otherwise—and a magnet for thrill-seeking kids and ne'er-do-wells on the lam.

Custodian Floyd is supposed to keep the front door covered in plywood. The plywood is torn loose and lying in the bushes and a hole led into gloom. This actually happens frequently. The aforementioned kids and ne'er-do-wells habitually break into the tower to seek their fun. Deputy Newcastle's cop intuition tells him the usual suspects aren't to blame.

"I'm going in," he says.

"You better not," says MJ. The King of Pop inhabits the back seat, his scrawny form crosshatched by the grilled partition between them. His pale

features are obscured in the shade of a slouch hat. He is the metaphorical shoulder-sitting angel.

“Got to. It’s my job.”

“You’re a swell guy, deputy. Don’t do it.”

“Who then?”

“You’re gonna die if you go in there alone.”

“I can call someone. Hendricks will back my play.”

“Can’t trust him.”

“Elam.”

“Your brother is a psychopath.”

“Hmm. Fair enough. I could ring Custer or Pearson. Heck, I could deputize both of them for the day.”

“Look, you can’t trust anyone.”

“I don’t.” Newcastle stows the thermos and slides on his wool gloves. He unclips the twelve gauge pump action from its rack and shoulders his way out of the cruiser. The road is slick beneath the tread of his boots, the breeze searing cold against his cheek. Snowflakes stick to his eyelashes. He takes a deep breath and trudges toward the entrance of the Frazier Tower. The dark gap recedes and blurs like a mirage.

True Romance isn’t Deputy Newcastle’s favorite movie. Too much blood and thunder for his taste. Nonetheless, he identifies with the protagonist, Clarence. In times of doubt Elvis Presley manifests and advises Clarence as a ghostly mentor.

The deputy adores the incomparable E, so he’s doubly disconcerted regarding his own hallucinations. Why in the heck does he receive visions of MJ, a pop icon who fills him with dread and loathing?

MJ visited him for the first time the previous spring and has appeared with increasing frequency. The deputy wonders if he’s gestating a brain tumor or if he’s slowly going mad like his grandfather allegedly did after Korea. He wonders if he’s got extra sensory powers or powers from God, although he hasn’t been exposed to toxic waste or radiation, nor is he particularly devout. Church for Christmas and Easter potluck basically does it for him.

Normally a brave man, he's too chicken to take himself into Anchorage for a CAT scan to settle the issue. He's also afraid to mention his invisible friend to anyone for fear of enforced medical leave and/or reassignment to a desk in the city.

In the beginning, Deputy Newcastle protested to his phantom partner: "You aren't real!" and "Leave me alone! You're a figment!" and so on. MJ had smiled ghoulishly and said, "I wanna be your friend, Deputy. I've come to lend you a hand. Hee-hee!"

Deputy Newcastle steps through the doorway into a decrepit foyer. Icicle stalactites descend in glistening clusters. The carpet has eroded to bare concrete. Cracks run through the concrete to the subflooring. It is a wasteland of fallen ceiling tiles, squirrel nests, and collapsed wiring. He creeps through the debris, shotgun clutched to his waist.

What does he find? An escaped convict, dirty and hypothermic, like in the fall of 2006? Kids smoking dope and spraying slogans of rebellion on the walls? A salmon-fattened black bear hibernating beneath a berm of dirt and leaves? No, he does not find a derelict, or children, or a snoozing ursine.

The Killer is waiting for him, as the King of Pop predicted.

Deputy Newcastle sees shadow bloom within shadow, yet barely feels the blade that opens him from stem to stern. It is happening to someone else. The razor-sharp tip punches through layers of insulating fabric, enters his navel, and rips upward. The sound of his undoing resonates in the small bones of his ears. He experiences an inexplicable rush of euphoria that is frightening in its intensity, then he is on his knees, bowed as if in prayer. His mind has become so disoriented he is beyond awareness of confusion. His parka is heavy, dragged low by the sheer volume of blood pouring from him. He laughs and groans as steam fills his throat.

The Killer takes the trooper hat from where it has rolled across the ground, dusts away snow and dirt, and puts it on as a souvenir. The Killer smiles in the fuzzy gloom, watching the deputy bleed and bleed.

Deputy Newcastle has dropped the shotgun somewhere along the way. Not that it matters—he has no recollection of the service pistol in his belt, much less the knowledge of how to work such a complicated mechanism. The

most he can manage at this point is a dumb, meaningless smile that doesn't even reflect upon the presence of his murderer.

His final thought isn't of Hannah, or of the King of Pop standing at his side and mouthing the words to "Smooth Criminal," eyes shining golden. No, the deputy's final thought isn't a thought, it's inchoate awe at the leading edge of darkness rushing toward him like the crown of a tidal wave.

A storm rolls in off the sea on the morning of the big Estate Christmas party. Nobody stirs anywhere outdoors except for Duke Pearson's two-ton snow plow with its twinkling amber beacon, and a police cruiser as the deputy makes his rounds. Both vehicles have been swallowed by swirls of white.

Tammy Ferro's fourteen-year-old son Mark is perched at the table like a raven. Clad in a black trenchcoat and exceptionally tall for his tender age, he's picking at a bowl of cereal and doing homework he shirked the previous evening. His mother is reading a back issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association. The cover illustration is of a mechanical heart cross-sectioned by a scalpel.

Tammy divorced her husband and moved into the village in September, having inherited apartment 202 from her Aunt Millicent. Tammy is thirty-three but can pass for twenty-five. Lonnie DeForrest's appreciation of her ass aided her in snagging a job at the Caribou Tavern waiting tables. She earned a degree in psychology from the University of Washington, fat lot of good that's done her. Pole dancing in her youth continues to pay infinitely greater dividends than the college education it financed.

She and Mark haven't spoken much since they came to Eagle Talon. She tells herself it's a natural byproduct of teenage reticence, adapting to a radically new environment, and less to do with resentment over the big blowup of his parents' marriage. They are not exactly in hiding. It is also safe to say her former husband, Matt, doesn't know anything about Aunt Millicent or the apartment in Alaska.

Out of the blue, Mark says, "I found out something really cool about Nate Custer."

Tammy has seen Custer around. Impossible not to when everyone occupies the village's only residence. Nice looking guy in his late forties. Devilish smile, carefree. Heavy drinker, not that that is so unusual in the Land of the Midnight Sun, but he wears it well. Definitely a Trouble with a capital T sort. He goes with that marine biologist Jessica Mace who lives on the fifth. Mace is kind of a cold fish, which seems apropos, considering her profession.

She says, "The glacier tour guide. Sure." She affects casualness by not glancing up from her magazine. She dislikes the fascination in her son's tone. Dislikes it on an instinctual level. It's the kind of tone a kid uses when he's going to show you a nasty wound, or some gross thing he's discovered in the woods.

"He survived the Moose Valley Slaughter. Got shot in the head, but he made it. Isn't that crazy? Man, I never met anybody that got shot before."

"That sounds dire." Guns and gun violence frighten Tammy. She doesn't know if she'll ever acclimate to Alaska gun culture. However, she is quite certain that she prefers grown men leave her impressionable teen son out of such morbid conversations, much less parade their scars for his delectation. Barbarians aren't at the gate; they are running the village.

"It happened twenty years ago. Moose Valley's a small town, even smaller than Eagle Talon. Only thirty people live there. It's in the interior… You got to fly supplies in or take a river barge." Mark isn't looking at her directly, either. He studies his black nails, idly flicking the chipped polish.

"Gee, that's definitely remote. What do people do there?" Besides shoot each other, obviously.

"Yeah, lame. They had *Pong*, maybe, and that's it. Nate says everybody was into gold mining and junk."

"Nate says?"

Mark blushes. "He was a little older than me when it all went down. This ex-Army guy moved in from the Lower Forty-Eight to look for gold, or whatever. Everybody thought he was okay. Turns out he was a psycho. He snapped and went around shooting everybody in town one night. Him and Nate were playing dominoes and the dude pulled a gun out of his pocket. Shot Nate right in the head and left him on the floor of his cabin. Nate

didn’t die. Heh. The psycho murdered eleven people before the state troopers bagged him as he was floating downriver on a raft.”

“Honey!”

“Sorry, sorry. The cops *apprehended* him. With a sniper rifle.”

“Did Nate tell you this?”

“I heard it around. It’s common knowledge, Mom. I was helping Tucker and Hendricks get an acetylene bottle into the back of his rig.”

She hasn’t heard this tale of massacre. Of course, she hasn’t made many friends in town. At least Mark is coming out of his shell. Despite the black duds and surly demeanor, he enjoys company, especially that of adults. Good thing since there are only half a dozen kids his age in the area. She’s noticed him mooning after a girl named Lilly. It seems pretty certain the pair are carrying on a rich, extracurricular social life via Skype and text…

“Working on English?” She sets aside her magazine and nods at his pile of textbooks and papers. “Need any help?”

He shrugs.

“C’mon. Watch ya got?”

“An essay,” he says. “Mrs. Chandler asked us to write five hundred words on what historical figure we’d invite to dinner.”

“Who’d you pick? Me, I’d go with Cervantes, or Freud. Or Vivien Leigh. She was dreamy.”

“Jack the Ripper.”

“Oh… That’s nice.”

A young, famous journalist drives to a rural home in Upstate New York. The house rests alone near the end of a lane. A simple rambler painted red with white trim. Hills and woods begin at the backyard. This is late autumn and the sun is red and gold as it comes through the trees. Just cool enough that folks have begun to put the occasional log into the fireplace, so the crisp air smells of applewood and maple.

He and the woman who is the subject of his latest literary endeavor sip lemonade and regard the sky and exchange pleasantries. An enormous pit bull suns itself on the porch a few feet from where the interview occurs. Allegedly, the dog is attack-trained. It yawns and farts.

The journalist finds it difficult not to stare at the old lady's throat where a scar cuts, so vivid and white, through the dewlapped flesh. He is aware that in days gone by his subject used to camouflage the wound with gypsy scarves and collared shirts. Hundreds of photographs and she's always covered up.

Mrs. Jessica Mace Goldwood knows the score. She drags on her Camel No. 9 and winks at him, says once her tits started hitting her in the knees she gave up vanity as a bad business. Her voice is harsh, only partially restored after a series of operations. According to the data, she recently retired from training security dogs. Her husband, Gerry Goldwood, passed away the previous year. There are no children or surviving relatives on record.

"Been a while since anybody bothered to track me down," she says. "Why the sudden interest? You writing a book?"

"Yeah," the journalist says. "I'm writing a book."

"Huh. I kinda thought there might be a movie about what happened at the Estate. A producer called me every now and again, kept saying the studio was 'this close' to green-lighting the project. I was gonna make a boatload of cash, and blah, blah, blah. That was, Jesus, twenty years ago." She exhales a stream of smoke and studies him with a shrewd glint in her eyes. "Maybe I shoulda written a book."

"Maybe so," says the journalist. He notices, at last, a pistol nestled under a pillow on the porch swing. It is within easy reach of her left hand. His research indicates she is a competent shot. The presence of the gun doesn't make him nervous—he has, in his decade of international correspondence, sat among war chiefs in Northern Pakistan, and ridden alongside Taliban fighters in ancient half-tracks seized from Russian armored cavalry divisions. He has visited Palestine and Georgia and seen the streets burn. He thinks this woman would be right at home with the hardest of the hard-bitten warriors he's interviewed.

“Life is one freaky coincidence, ain’t it though?” She stares into the woods. Her expression is mysterious. “Julie Vellum died last week. Ticker finally crapped out.”

“Julie Vellum…” He scans his notes. “Right. She cashed in big time. Author of how many bestselling New Age tracts? Friend of yours?”

“Nah, I despised the bitch. She’s the last, that’s all. Well, there’s that guy who did psychedelic music for a while. He’s in prison for aggravated homicide. Got involved with a cult and did in some college kids over in Greece. Can’t really count him, huh? I’m getting sentimental in my dotage. Lonely.”

“Lavender McGee. He’s not in prison. They transferred him to an institution for the criminally insane. He gets day passes if you can believe it.”

“The fuck is this world coming to? What is it you wanna ask me?”

“I have one question for you.”

“Just one?” Her smile is amused, but sharp. It has been honed by a grief that has persisted for more than the latter half of her long life.

“Just one.” He takes the small recorder from his shirt pocket, clicks a button, and sets it on the table between them. “More than one, of course. But this one is the biggie. Are you ready?”

“Sure, yeah. I’m ready.”

“Mrs. Goldwood, why are you alive?”

Wind moves the trees behind the house. A flurry of red and brown leaves funnel across the yard, smack against the cute skirting. A black cloud covers the sun and hangs there. The temperature plummets. Gravel crunches in the lane.

The dog growls, and is on its feet, head low, mouth open to bare many, many teeth. The fur on its back is standing in a ridge. It is Cerberus’s very own pup.

“Oh, motherfucker,” says Jessica Mace Goldwood. She’s got the revolver in her hand, hammer cocked. Her eyes blaze with a gunfighter’s fire as she half crouches, elbows in tight, knees wide. “It’s never over with these sonsofbitches.”

“What’s happening?” The journalist has ducked for cover, hands upraised in the universal sign of surrender. “Jesus H., lady! Don’t shoot me!” He glances over his shoulder and sees a man in the uniform of a popular parcel delivery service slamming the door of a van and roaring away in a cloud of smoking rubber.

“Aw, don’t fret. Me and Atticus just don’t appreciate those delivery guys comin’ around,” she says. The pit bull snarls and throws himself down at her feet. She uncocks the revolver and tucks it into the waistband of her track pants. “So, young man. Where were we?”

He wipes his face and composes himself. In a hoarse voice he says, “I guess what happened in Alaska doesn’t let go.”

“Huh? Don’t be silly—I smoked that psycho. Nah, I hate visitors. You’re kinda cute, so I made an exception. Besides, you’re gonna pay me for this story, kiddo.”

He tries for a sip of lemonade and ice rattles in the empty glass. His hand trembles. She pats his arm and takes the glass inside for a refill. Atticus follows on her heel. The journalist draws a breath to steady himself. He switches off the recorder. A ray of sun burns through the clouds and spotlights him while the rest of the world blurs into an impressionistic watercolor. A snowflake drifts down from outer space and freezes to his cheek.

She returns with a fresh glass of lemonade to find the journalist slumped in the lawn chair. Someone has placed an ancient state trooper’s hat on his head and tilted it so that the man’s face is partially covered. The crown of the hat is matted with dried gore that has, with the passing decades, indelibly stained the fabric. A smooth, vertical slice begins at the hollow of his throat and continues to belt level. His intestines are piled beneath his trendy hiking shoes. His ears lie upon the table. Steam rises from the corpse.

Atticus growls at the odors of shit and blood.

Jessica gazes at him in amazement. “Goddamnit, dog. *Now* you growl. Thanks a heap.” She notices a wet crimson thumbprint on the recorder. She sighs and lights another cigarette and presses PLAY. Comes the static-inflected sound of wind rushing across ice, of snow shushing against tin, of

arctic darkness and slow, sliding fog. Fire crackles in the background. These sounds have crept across the span of forty years.

A voice, garbled and muted by interference, whispers, “Jessica, we need to know. Why are you alive?” Snow and wind fill a long gap. Then, “Did you cut your own throat? Did you? Are you dead, Jessica? Are you dead, or are you playing? How much longer do you think you have?” Nothing but static after that, and the tape ends.

Intuition tells her that the journalist didn’t file a plan with his network, that he rolled into the boondocks alone, that when he doesn’t arrive at the office on Monday morning it will be a fulfillment of the same pattern he’s followed countless times previously. The universe won’t skip a beat. A man such as he has enemies waiting in the woodwork, ready to wrap him in a carpet and take him far away. It will be a minor unsolved mystery that his colleagues have awaited since his first jaunt into a war torn region in the Middle East.

She can’t decide whether to call the cops or hide the body, roll the rental car into a ditch somewhere and torch it. *Why, yes, Officer, the young fellow was here for a while the other day. Missing? Oh, dear, that’s terrible…*

“Jack?” she says to the hissing leaves. Her hand is at her neck, caressing the scar that defines her existence. “Nate? Are you out there?”

The sun sets and night is with her again.

Three years, six months, and fifteen days before Dolly Sammerdyke is eviscerated and dropped down a mineshaft, where her bones rest to this very day, she tells her brother Tom she’s moving from Fairbanks to Eagle Talon. She’s got an in with a woman who keeps the books at a shipping company and there’s an opening for an onsite clerk. Tom doesn’t like it. He lived in the village during a stretch in the 1980s when his luck was running bad.

“Listen, kid. It’s a bum deal.”

“Not as if I have a better option,” she says.

“Bad place, sis.”

“Yeah? What’s bad about it? The people?”

“Bad people, sure. Bad neighborhood, bad history. Only one place to live in Eagle Talon. Six-floor apartment building. Ginormus old tenement. Dark, drafty, creepy as shit. It’s a culture thing. People there are weird and clannish. You’ll hate it.”

“I’ll call you every week.”

Dolly calls Tom every week until her death. He doesn’t miss her calls at first because he’s landed a gig as a luthier in Nashville and his new girlfriend, an aspiring country and western musician, commands all of his attention these days.

Did the Final Girl do it? Was it this person or that? You can only laugh at the preposterousness of such conceits. You can only weep. As the omniscient narrator of some antique fairy tale once declaimed: Fool! Rub your eyes and look again!

You will never die—nothing does.

From the journal of Nathan E. Custer as transcribed from the original text by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Anchorage:

I’ve never told anyone the whole truth about Moose Valley, or this recurring dream I’ve suffered in the following years. Probably not a dream; more of a vision. Nonetheless, for clarity’s sake, we’ll go with it being a dream. The dream has two parts. The first part is true to life, a memory of events with the tedious details edited from the narrative.

In the true to life part of the dream, Michael Allen and I are playing dominoes in the dim kitchen of my old place in Moose Valley. I’d seen him standing in the yard, a ghostly shape in the darkness, and had invited him to come out of the weather without thinking to ask why he was lurking.

It’s fall of ’93, around four in the morning. He’s winning, he always wins at these games—pool, checkers, cards, dominoes—although everybody likes him anyway.

Allen has only been in town for a few months. An ex-Army guy, so he's capable, with an easy smile and a wry wit. Long hair, but kempt. Keeps to himself for the most part in a one-room cottage by the river. He's passionate about Golden Age comic books and the poetry of James Dickey. I was in the cottage for maybe five minutes once. Dude kept it to a minimum and neat as you please. Gun oil scent, although no guns in view. Yeah.

He pockets my last eleven dollars with a shrug and an apologetic grin. Says, Thanks for the game, and pulls on his orange sock cap and stands. I turn away to grab a beer from the icebox, hair of the dog that bit me, and the bullet passes through my skull above my ear and I'm on the floor, facedown. He squeezes the trigger again and I hear the hammer snap, a dud in the chamber. Or he hadn't reloaded from slaughtering the Haden family across the street. We'll never know. Anyway, I'm unblinking, unresponsive, paralyzed, so he leaves me for dead. The front door slams and sunlight creeps across the tiles and makes the spreading blood shiny.

The second part of the dream is a fantasy cobbled and spliced from real events. I have a disembodied view of everything that happens next.

Allen slips down to the launch and steals a rubber raft. He lets the flow carry him downstream. He's packed sandwiches and beer, and has a small picnic. God, it's a beautiful day. The mountain peaks are white with fresh snow, but the lower elevations are yet green and gold. The air is brisk, only hinting at the bitter chill to come. A beaver circles the raft, occasionally slapping the water with its tail. The crack is like a gunshot. Allen chuckles and scans the eggshell-blue sky from behind a pair of tinted aviator glasses.

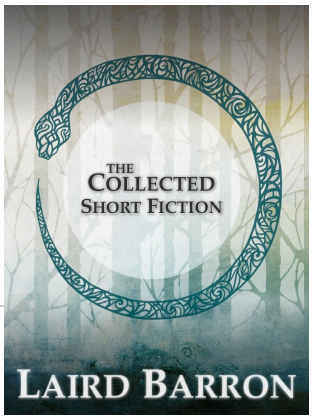
The current gradually picks up as it approaches a stretch of falls and rapids. A black dot detaches from the sun and drops toward the earth. Allen unlimbers the 30.06 bolt action rifle he's stowed under a blanket. His balance is uncertain and the first round pings harmlessly through the fuselage of the police chopper. He ejects the shell and sights again, cool as the ice on the mountains, and this will be a kill shot. The SWAT sniper is a hair quicker and Allen is knocked from the raft. He plunges into the water and sinks instantly. The raft zips over the falls and is demolished.

A sad, tragic case closes.

The fact is, Allen survives for a few minutes. He is a tough, passionless piece of work, a few cells short of Homo sapiens status, and that helps him experience a brutal and agonizing last few moments on the mortal plane. He is sucked into a vortex and wedged under and between some rocks where he eventually suffocates and drowns. This is a remote and dangerous area. The cops never recover the body.

Small fish nibble away his fingers, then his face, then the rest of it.

Termination Dust



This version taken from *Swift to Chase*, 2016
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Let be be finale of seem.
—Wallace Stevens

Hunting in Alaska, especially as one who enjoys the intimacy of knives, bludgeons, and cords, is fraught with peril. Politically speaking, the difference between a conservative and a liberal in the forty-ninth state is the caliber of handgun one carries. Despite a couple of close calls, you've not been shot. Never been shot, never been caught, knock on wood.

That's what you used to say, in any event.

People look at you every day. People look at you every day, but they don't see you. People will ask why and you will reply, Why not?

Tyson Langtree's last words: "I tell you, man. Andy Kaufman is alive, man. He's alive, bigger than shit, and cuttin' throats. He's Elvis, man. He's the king of death." This was overheard at the packed Caribou Creek Tavern on a Friday night about thirty seconds before bartender Lonnie DeForrest tossed his sorry ass out onto a snowbank. Eighteen below zero Fahrenheit and a two and a half mile walk home. Dead drunk, wearing coveralls and a Miners Do It Deeper ball cap.

Nobody's seen the old boy since. Deputy Newcastle found a lot of blood in Langtree's bed, though. Splattered on the walls and ceiling of his shack on Midnight Road. Hell of a lot of blood. That much blood and no corpse, well, you got to wonder, right? Got to wonder why Langtree didn't keep his mouth shut. Everybody knows Andy Kaufman is crazy as a motherfucker. He been whacking motormouth fools since '84.

You were in the bar that night and you followed Langtree back to his humble abode. Man, he was surprised to see you step from the shadows.

For the record, his last words were actually, "Please don't kill me, E!"

Jessica Mace lies in darkness, slightly drunk, wholly frustrated. Heavy bass thuds through the ceiling from Snodgrass' party. She'd left early and in a huff after locking horns with Julie Vellum, her honorable enemy since the hazy days of high school. Is hate too strong an emotion to describe how she feels about Julie? Nope, hatred seems quite perfect, although she's long since forgotten initial *casus belli* of their eternal war. Vellum—what kind of name is that, anyhow? It describes either ancient paper or a sheepskin condom. The bitch is ridiculous. Mobile home trash, bottom drawer sorority sister, tits sliding toward earth with a vengeful quickness. Easiest lay of the Last Frontier. A whore in name and deed.

JV called *her* a whore and splashed a glass of beer on her dress. Cliché, bitch, so very cliché. Obviously JV hadn't gotten the memo that Jessica and Nate were through as of an hour prior to the party. The evil slut had carried a torch for him since he cruised into town with his James Dean too-cool-for school shtick and set all the girlies' hearts aflutter a few weeks before Katrina leveled New Orleans a continent away.

Snodgrass, Wannamaker, and Ophelia, the beehive-hairdo lady from 510, jumped between them before the fur could fly. Snodgrass was an old hand at breaking up fistfights. Lucky for Julie, too. Jessica made up her mind to fix that girl's wagon once and for all, had broken a champagne glass for an impromptu weapon when Snodgrass locked her in a bear hug. Meanwhile, Deputy Newcastle stood near the wet bar, grimly shaking his huge blond head. Or it might've been the deputy's evil twin, Elam. Hard to tell through the crush of the crowd, the smoke, and the din. If she'd seen him with his pants down, she'd have known with certainty.

Here she is after the fracas, sulking while the rest of town let down its hair and would continue to do so deep into the night. Gusts from the blizzard shake the building. Power comes from an emergency generator in the basement. However, cable is on the fritz. She would have another go at

Nate, but Nate isn't around, he is gone-Johnson after she'd told him to hit the bricks and never come back no more, no more. Hasty words uttered in fury, a carbon copy of her own sweet ma who (before her ultimate vanishing act) ran through half the contractors and fishermen in the southeast during a thirty-year career of bar fights and flights from the law. Elizabeth Taylor of the Tundra, was Ma, though everybody called her Lucius. Nate, an even poorer man's Richard Burton. Her father, Esteban Montgomery Mace, the man who put up with his wife's humiliating exploits? Dad (like poor Jack and many Alaskan fishermen) died at sea and Jessica thought of him nevermore.

Why hadn't Nate been at the party? He *always* made an appearance. Could it be she's really and truly broken his icy heart? Good!

She fumbles in the bedside drawer, pushing aside the cell charger, Jack's photograph, the revolver her brother Elwood gave her before he got shredded by a claymore mine in Afghanistan, and locates the "personal massager" she ordered from Fredericks of Hollywood and has a go with that instead. Stalwart comrade, loyal stand-in when she's between boyfriends and lovers, Buzz hasn't let her down yet.

Jessica opens her eyes as the mattress sags. A shadow enters her blurry vision. She smells cologne or perfume or hairspray, very subtle and totally androgynous. Almost familiar. Breathless from the climax, it takes her a moment to collect her wits.

She says, "Jack, is that you?" Which was a strange conclusion, since Jack presumably drifts along deep sea currents, his rugged redneck frame reduced to bones and sweet melancholy memories. All hands of the *Prince Valiant* lost to Davey Jones's Locker, wasn't it? That makes three out of the four main men of her life dead. Only Nate is still kicking. Does he count now that she's banished him to a purgatory absent her affection?

Fingers clamp her mouth and ram her head into the pillow hard enough that stars shoot everywhere. Her mind flashes to a vivid image: Gothic oil paintings of demons perched atop the bosoms of swooning women. So morbidly beautiful, those antique pictures. She thinks of the pistol in the dresser that she might've grabbed instead of the vibrator. Too late baby, too late now.

A knife glints as it arcs downward. Her attacker is dressed in black so the weapon appears to levitate under its own motive force. The figure slashes her throat with vicious inelegance. An untutored butcher. It is cold and she tastes the metal. But it doesn't hurt.

Problem is, constant reader, you can't believe a damned word of this story. The killer could be anyone. Cops recovered some bodies reduced to charcoal briquettes. Two of those charred corpses were never properly identified, and what with all the folks who went missing prior to the Christmas party…

My life flashed before my eyes as I died of a slashed throat and a dozen other terrible injuries. My life, the life of countless others who were in proximity. Wasn't pretty, wasn't neat or orderly, or linear. I experienced the fugue as an exploding kaleidoscope of imagery. Those images replay at different velocities, over and over in a film spliced together out of sequence. My hell is to watch a bad horror movie until the stars burn out.

I get the gist of the plot, but the nuances escape into the vacuum. The upshot being that I know hella lot about my friends and neighbors; although, not everything. Many of the juiciest details elude me as I wander purgatory, reliving a life of sin. Semi-omniscience is a drag.

In recent years, some pundits have theorized *I* was the Eagle Talon Ripper. Others have raised the possibility it was Jackson Bane, that he'd been spotted in San Francisco months after the *Prince Valiant* went down, that he'd been overheard plotting bloody revenge against me, Jessica, a dozen others. Laughable, isn't it? The majority of retired FBI profilers agree.

No matter, I'm the hot pick these days. Experts say the trauma I underwent in Moose Valley twisted my mind. Getting shot in the head did something to my brain. Gave me a lobotomy of sorts. Except instead of going passive, I turned into a monster, waited twenty-plus years, and went on a killing spree.

It's a sexy theory what with the destroyed and missing bodies, mine included. The killer could've been a man or woman, but the authorities bet on a man. Simple probability and the fact some of the murders required a

great deal of physical strength and a working knowledge of knots and knives. I fit the bill on all counts. There's also the matter of my journal. Fragments of it were pieced together by a forensics team and the shit in there could be misconstrued. What nobody knows is that after the earlier event in Moose Valley, I read a few psychology textbooks. The journal was therapy, not some veiled admission of guilt. Unfortunately, I was also self-medicating with booze and that muddied the waters even more.

Oh, well. What the hell am I going to do about it now?

If you ask me, Final Girl herownself massacred all those people. What's my proof? Nothing except instinct. Call me a cynic—it doesn't seem plausible a person can survive a gashed throat and still possess the presence to retrieve a pistol, in the dark, no less, and plug the alleged killer to save the day. How convenient that she couldn't testify to the killer's identity on account of the poor lighting. Even more convenient how that fire erased all the evidence. In the end, it's her word, her version of events.

Yeah, it's a regular cluster. Take the wrong peg from this creaky narrative and the whole log pile falls on you. Anyway you know. You know.

What if… What if they were in it together?

Nights grow long in the tooth. A light veil of snow descends the peaks. Termination dust, the sourdoughs call it. You wait and watch for signs. Geese fly backwards in honking droves, south. Sunsets flare crimson, then fade to black as fog rolls over the beach. People leave the village and do not return. A few others never left but are gone all the same. They won't be returning either.

The last of the cruise ships migrated from Eagle Talon on Saturday. The Princess Wing blared klaxons and horns and sloshed up the channel in a shower of streamers and confetti, its running lights blazing holes through the mist. A few hardy passengers in red and yellow slickers braved the drizzle to perch along the rails. Some waved to the dockworkers. Others cheered over the rumble of the diesels. Seagulls bobbed aloft, dark scraps and tatters against the low clouds that always curtain this place.

You mingled with the people on the dock and smiled at the birds, enjoying their faint screams. Only animals seem to recognize what you are. You hate them too. That's why you smile, really. Hate keeps you warm come the freeze.

Ice will soon clog the harbor. Jagged mountains encircle the village on three sides in a slack-jawed Ouroboros. The other route out of town is a two-mile tunnel that opens onto the Seward Highway. This tunnel is known as the Throat. Anchorage lies eighty miles north, as the gull flies. Might as well be the moon when winter storms come crashing in on you. Long-range forecasts call for heavy snow and lots of wind. There will come a day when all roads and ways shall be impassable.

You've watched. You've waited. Salivated.

You'll retreat into the Estate with the sheep. It's a dirty white concrete superstructure plonked down in the shadow of a glacier. Bailey Frazier & Sons built the Frazier Estate Apartments in 1952 along with the Frazier Tower that same year. History books claim these were the largest buildings in Alaska for nearly three decades, and outside of the post office, cop shop, library, little red schoolhouse, the Caribou Tavern, and a few warehouses, that's it for the village proper. Both were heavily damaged by the '64 quake and subsequent tsunami. Thirteen villagers were swept away on the wave. Four more got crushed in falling debris. The Tower stands empty and ruined to this day, but the Estate is mostly functional; a secure, if decrepit, bulwark against the wilderness.

You are an earthquake, a tidal wave, a mountain of collapsing stone, waiting to happen. You are the implacable wilderness personified. What is in you is ancient as the black tar between stars. A void that howls in hunger and mindless antipathy against the heat of the living.

Meanwhile, this winter will be business as usual. Snowbirds flee south to California and Florida while the hardcore few hunker in dim apartments like animals in burrows and play cribbage or video games, or gnaw yourselves bloody with regret. You'll read, and drink, and fuck. Emmitt Snodgrass will throw his annual winter gala. More drinking and even more fucking, but with the sanction of costume and that soul-warping hash Bobby

Aickman passes around. By spring, the survivors will emerge, pale as moles, voracious for light as you are for the dark.

With the official close of tourist season, Eagle Talon population stands at one hundred and eighty-nine full-time residents. Three may be subtracted from that number, subtracted from the face of the earth, in fact, although nobody besides the unlucky trio and you know anything about that.

Dolly Sammerdyke. Regis and Thora Lugar. And the Lugars' cat, Frenchy. The cat died hardest of them all. Nearly took out your eye. Maybe that will come back to haunt you. The devil's in the…

Elam Newcastle is interviewed by the FBI at Providence Hospital. He has survived the Frazier Estate inferno with second degree burns and frostbite of his left hand. Two fingers may have to be amputated and the flesh of his neck and back possess the texture of melted wax. In total, a small price to pay considering the hell-on-Earth-scenario he's escaped. His New Year's vow is to find a better trade than digging ditches.

He tells the suit what he knows as the King of Pop hovers in the background, partially hidden by curtains and shadows. This phantom, or figment, has shown up regularly since the evening of the massacre at the Estate. Elam is not a fan and doesn't understand why he's having this hallucination of the singer grinning and gesticulating with that infamous rhinestone-studded glove. It is rather disturbing. Doubly disturbing since it's impossible to attribute it to the codeine.

The investigator blandly reveals how the local authorities have recently found Elam's twin brother deceased in the Frazier Tower. It was, according to the account, a gruesome spectacle, even by police standards. The investigator describes the scene in brief, albeit vivid, detail.

Elam takes in this information, one eye on the moonwalking apparition behind the FBI agent. Finally, he says, "Whaddaya mean they stole his hat?"

Scenes from an apocalypse:

Viewed from the harbor, Eagle Talon is an inkblot with a steadily brightening dot of flame at its heart. The Frazier Estate Apartments have been set ablaze. Meanwhile, the worst blizzard to hit Alaska since 1947 rages on. Flames leap from the upper stories, whipped by the wind. Window glass shatters. Fire, smoke, and driving snow boil off into outer darkness. That faint keening is either the shrieks of the damned as they roast in the penthouse, or metal dissolving like Styrofoam as the inferno licks it to ash. Or both.

Men and women in capes and masks, gossamer wings and top hats, mill in the icy courtyard. Their shadows caper in the bloody glare. They are the congregants of a frigid circle of Hell, summoned to the Wendigo's altar. They join hands and begin to waltz. Flakes of snow and ash cover them, bury them.

The angry fire is snapping yellow. Pull farther out into the cold and the dark and fire becomes red through the filter of the blizzard, then shivers to black. Keep pulling back until there are no stars, no fire, no light of any kind. Only the snow sifting upward from the void to fill the world with silence and sleep.

We make love with the lights off. The last time, I figure. She calls me Jack when she comes and probably has no idea. Jackson Bane died on the Bering Sea two winters gone. His ghost makes itself known. He knocks stuff over to demonstrate he's unhappy, like when I'm fucking his former girlfriend. Not hard to imagine him raving impotently behind the wall of sleep, working himself toward a splendorous vengeance. Perhaps that makes him more of a revenant.

My name is Nathan Custer. I fear the sea. Summertime sees me guiding tours on the glacier for Emmitt Snodgrass. Winter, I lie low and collect unemployment. Cash most of those checks down at the Caribou. Laphroaig is my scotch of choice and it's a choice I make every livelong day, and twice a day once snow flies. Hell of an existence. I fought with Jack at Emmitt Snodgrass' annual winter party in '07. Blacked his eye and demolished a coffee table. Don't even recall what precipitated the brawl. I only recall Jessica in a white tee and cotton shorts standing there with a

bottle of Lowenbrau in her hand. Snodgrass forgave me the mess. We never patched it up, Jack and I.

Too late, now. Baby, it's too late.

While Jessica showers, I prowl naked through her apartment, peering into cupboards and out the window at snowflakes reflected in a shaft of illumination pitched by the twin lamps over the lobby foyer. Ten feet beyond the Estate wall lies a slate of nothingness. Depending on the direction, it's either sea ice and, eventually, open black water, or mountains. This is five-oh-something in the p.m., December. Sun has been down for half an hour.

"What are you doing?" Jessica, head wrapped in a towel, strikes a Venus pose in the bathroom doorway. The back-lighting lends her a halo. She's probably concerned about the butcher knife I pulled from the cutlery block. Wasn't quick enough to hide it behind my leg. Naked guy with a knife presents an environmental hazard even if you don't suspect him of being a homicidal maniac, which she might.

"Getting ready for the party," I say, disingenuous as ever.

"Yeah, you look ready." She folds her arms. She thinks I've been using again; it's in her posture. "What the hell, Nate?"

Unfortunately for everyone, I'm not an outwardly articulate man. I'm my father's son. Mom didn't hate his guts because he slapped her at the '88 Alaska State Fair; she hated him because he refused to argue. When the going got shouty, Dad was a walker-awayer. I realize, here in my incipient middle age, that his tendency to clam up under stress wasn't from disrespect. He simply lost his ability to address the women in his life coherently.

"Uh," is what I come up with. Instead of, *Baby, I heard a noise. Somebody was trying the door. Swear to God, I saw the knob jiggle.* I don't have the facility to ask her, *If I was jacked up, wouldn't you have noticed it while we were in bed?* More than anything, I want to tell her of my suspicions. Something is terribly wrong in our enclave. People are missing. Strange shadows are on the move and I have a feeling the end is near for some of us.

"Jesus. Cal's right. He's right. The bastard is right. My god."

“Cal’s right? He’s not right. What did he say?” Add Building Superintendent Calvin Wannamaker to my little black book of hate. I grip the knife harder, am conscious of my oversized knuckles and their immediate ache. Arthritis, that harbinger of old age and death, nips at me.

“Hit the road, Jack.” She points the Finger of Doom, illustrating where I should go. Presumably Hell lies in that general direction.

Maybe I can bulldoze through this scene. “That makes twice you called me Jack today. We have to get ready for the party. Where the hell are my pants?” I look everywhere but directly into the sun that is her gaze.

“You’ve lost your damned mind,” she says in a tone of wonderment, as if waking from a long, violent dream and seeing everything for how it really is. “You need to leave.”

“The party. My pants.”

“Find another pair. Goodbye. And put that back. It was a present. From Jack!” She’s hollering now.

“Wait a second… Are you and Cal—”

“Shut your mouth and go.”

I put the cleaver in the block, mightily struggling to conjure the magic words to reverse the course of this shipwreck. This isn’t love, but it’s the best thing I’ve had in recent memory. No dice. Naked guy hurled from the nest by his naked girlfriend. This is trailer park drama. Julie Vellum will cream over the details once the gossip train gets chugging. Maybe I’ll throw a fuck into her. Ah, sweet revenge, hey? The prospect doesn’t thrill me, for some reason. I walk into the hall and lurk there a while, completely at a loss. I press the buzzer twice. Give up when there’s no answer, and start the long, shameful trudge to my apartment.

The corridors of the Estate are gloomy. Tan paneled walls and muddy recessed lights spaced far enough apart it feels like you’re walking along the bottom of a lake. The effect is heightened due to the tears in my eyes. By the time I get to the elevator, I’m freezing. The super keeps this joint about three degrees above an ice-locker.

“Nate!” The whisper is muted and sexless. A shadow materializes from behind the wooden statue of McKinley Frazier that haunts this end of the

fifth floor. It’s particularly murky here because the overhead has been busted. A splinter of glass stabs my bare foot. I’m hopping around, trying to cover my balls and act naturally.

“Nate, hold still, pal.” Still whispering. Whoever it is, they’re wearing all black and they’ve got a hammer.

Oh, wait, I recognize this person. I’m convinced it’s impossible that this could be happening to me for the second time in twenty years. This isn’t even connected to the infamous Moose Valley slaughter. It’s like winning top prize in a sweepstakes twice in one’s lifetime. Why me, oh gods above and below? I’m such a likeable guy. Kurt Russell wishes he was as handsome as I am. So much to live for. Living looks to be all done for me.

The hammer catches the faint light. It gleams and levitates.

“What are you going to do with that?” I say. It’s a rhetorical question.

Jessica Mace can’t actually speak when the feds interview her. She’s still eating through tubes. The knife missed severing her carotid by a millimeter. She scribbles responses to their interrogation on a portable whiteboard. Her rage is palpable, scarcely blunted by exhaustion and painkillers.

Ma’am, after this individual assaulted you in bed, what happened?

Came to. Choking on blood. Alive. Grabbed gun. Heard noises from living room. The killer had someone in a chair and was torturing them.

Who was in the chair?

Nate Custer.

Nathan Custer?

Yes.

Did you see the suspect’s face?

No.

Approximately how tall was the suspect?

I don’t know. Was dark. Was bleeding out. Confused.

Right. But you saw something. And you discharged your firearm.

Yes.

You’re sure it was a him?

Him, her. The killer. My vision was blurry. A big, fuzzy shadow.

Are you admitting that you fired your weapon multiple times at… at a shadow?

NO! I shot a goddamned psycho five times. You’re welcome.

How can you be certain, Ms. Mace?

Maybe I can’t. Killer could’ve been anyone. Could *be* anyone. The doctor. The nurse. Maybe it was you. YOU look fucking suspicious.

Calvin Wannamaker and his major domo Hendricks are bellied up to the bar at the Caribou Tavern for their weekly confab. They’ve already downed several rounds.

DeForrest is polishing glasses and watching the new waitress’s skirt cling in exactly the right places as she leans over table No. 9 to flirt with big Luke Tucker. Tucker is a longshoreman married to a cute young stay-at-home mom named Gladys. Morphine is playing “Thursday” on the jukebox while the village’s resident Hell’s Angel, Vince Diamond, shoots pool against himself. VD got paroled from Goose Bay Correctional Facility last month. He has spent nineteen of his forty-eight years in various prisons. His is the face of an axe murderer. His left cheek is marred by a savage gash, freshly scabbed. Claims he got the wound in a fight with his newest old lady. Deputy Newcastle has been over to their apartment three times to make peace.

The bar is otherwise unoccupied.

“Found a dead cat in the bin.” Wannamaker lights a cigarette. A Winston. It’s the brand he thinks best suits his Alaskan image. He prefers Kools, alas. “Neck was broke, eyes buggin’ out. Gruesome.” The super loves cats. He keeps three Persians in his suite on the first floor. He’s short and thin and wears a round bushy beard and plaid sweaters, or if it’s a special occasion, black turtlenecks. Hendricks started calling him “Cat Piss Man’’ behind his back and the name kind of stuck. Neither man was born in Alaska.

Wannamaker comes from New York, Hendricks from Illinois. They've never adjusted to life on the frontier. They behave like uneasy foreigners in their own land.

"Oh, yeah?" Hendricks says with a patent couldn't-give-a-shit-less tone. No cat lover, Hendricks. *Don't like cats, love pussy,* he's been quoted time and again. He's taller than Wannamaker, and broad-shouldered. Legend says he worked for the Chicago Outfit before he got exiled to Alaska. Everyone considers him a goon and that's a fairly accurate assessment.

"Floyd found it, I guess is what I mean," Wannamaker says.

Floyd is the chief custodian and handyman for the Estate. He was also a train-hopping hobo for three decades prior to landing the Estate gig.

"The hell was Floyd doing in the bin?"

"Makin' a nest. Divin' for pearls. I dunno. He found a dead cat is all I know. Thinks it belonged to the Lugars. They split ten days ago. Must a been in a rush, cause they locked their doors and dropped the keys in my box without so much as a by your leave. Earlier and earlier every year, you know that? I don't get why they even make the trip anymore. I get three or four calls a day, people looking for an apartment. At least."

Hendricks sips his beer. He doesn't say anything. He too is checking out the posterior of Tammy, the new girl.

"Yeah, exactly." Wannamaker nods wisely in response to some ghost of a comment. "I hate snowbirds. Hate. Too cheap to pack their old cat and ship him to Florida. What's Lugar do? Snaps the poor critter's neck and dumps him in the garbage. Bah. Tell you what I'm gonna do, I'm gonna file a report with Newcastle. Sic the ever lovin' law on that sick jerk. Shouldn't have a cat. If he didn't own his apartment I'd yank his lease faster than you can spit."

Hendricks pushes his bottle aside. "That's a weird story."

"Lugar's a weird dude. He sells inflatable dolls and whatcha call 'em, body pillows."

"Is that what he does?"

"Oh, yeah, man. He flies to Japan every so often and wines and dines a bunch of CEOs in Tokyo. They're nuts for that stuff over there."

“Huh. I figured he’d be retired. Guy’s gotta be pushing seventy.”

“I guess when you love what you do it ain’t work.”

Words to live by.

Last words of Mark Ferro, aged thirty-three as he is executed by lethal injection for a homicide unrelated to the Frazier Estate Massacre: “It was meeeeeee!”

You’ve exercised a certain amount of restraint prior to the blizzard. That’s over. Now, matters will escalate. While everybody else has gathered upstairs for Snodgrass’ annual bash, you sneak away to share a special moment with Nathan Custer.

Does it hurt when I do this? *It’s a rhetorical question.*

You don’t expect Custer can hear you after you popped his eardrums with a slot screwdriver. Can’t see you either. Blood pumps from the crack in his skull. Smack froma ball peen hammer took the starch right out of our hero. He coughs bubbles. Don’t need tongue or teeth to blow bubbles, though it helps.

It may not even be Custer under that mask of gore. Could be Deputy Newcastle or Hendricks. Shit, could be that arrogant little prick Wannamaker at this rate. True story, you’ve fantasized about killing each of them so often that the lines might well be erased.

Except, haven’t you wanted to end your existence? Sure you have. You’d love nothing more than to take your own miserable head off with a cleaver, string your own guts over the tree the way those cheap Victorian saps strung popcorn before Christmas went electric.

This is where it gets very, very confusing.

For a lunatic moment you’re convinced it’s you, slumped there, mewling like a kitten, soul floating free and formless while an angel of vengeance goes to work on your body with hammer and tongs. Yeah, maybe it’s you in

the chair and Custer, or Newcastle, or Wannamaker, has been the killer all along. It ain't pretty, having one's mind blown like this.

You were certain it was Custer when you put him in the chair, but that was a long time ago. So much has changed since then. The continents have drifted closer together, the geography of his features has altered for the worse. It's gotten dark. There's the storm and your sabotage of the reserve generator to thank. You've gathered wool and lost the plot. Can't even remember why you'd reserve special tortures for this one.

Why are your hands so fascinating all of the sudden?

Oh, Jesus, what if Snodgrass spiked the punch? He'd once threatened to dose his party-goers with LSD. Nobody took him seriously. But, what if? That would explain why the darkness itself has begun to shine, why your nipples are hard as nail-heads, why you've suddenly developed spidey-sense. Oh, Emmitt Snodgrass, that silly bastard; his guts are going to get extracted through his nose, and soon.

You detect the creak of a loose board and turn in time to see a snub-nosed revolver extending from a crouched silhouette. A lady's gun, so sleek and petite. Here's a flash of fire from the barrel that reveals the bruised face of the final girl. Don't she know you're invulnerable to lead? Didn't she read the rules inside the box top? Problem is, it's another sign that your version of reality is shaky, because you are sure as hell that you killed her already. Sliced her throat, ear to lovely ear. Yet, here she is, blasting you into Kingdom Come with her itty bitty toy pistol. What the fuck is up with that?

Double tap. Triple, dipple, quadruple tap. Bitch ain't taking any chances, is she? You're down, sprawled next to your beloved victim, whoever he is. Your last. The final girl done seen to that, hasn't she?

Custer, is that you? you ask the body in the chair. He don't give anything away, only grins at you through the blood. Luckily you're made of sterner stuff. Four bullets isn't the end. You manage to get your knees and elbows underneath you for a lethal spring in the penultimate frame of the flick of your life, the lunge where you take the girl into your arms and squeeze until her bones crack and her tongue protrudes. When you're done, you'll crawl away to lick your wounds and plot the sequel. Four shots ain't enough to kill the very beating heart of evil.

Turns out, funny thing, the final girl has one more bullet. She hobbles over and puts it in your head.

Well, shit—

"Christ on a pony, what are you *dooo-ing*?" This plaintive utterance issues from Eliza Overstreet's ripe mouth. She's dressed as a cabaret dancer or Liza Minnelli, or some such bullshit. White, white makeup and sequins and tights. A tight, tight wig cropped as a Coptic monk's skullcap. All *sparkly.*

Emmitt Snodgrass cackles and pops another tab of acid. The rest of the batch he crushes into the rich red clot of punch in a crystal bowl shaped as a furious eagle. The furious eagle punch bowl is courtesy of Luke Tucker, collector of guns, motorcycles, and fine crystal. The suite is prepared—big Christmas tree, wall-to-wall tinsel, stockings and disco balls hung with care. Yeah, Snodgrass is ready for action, Jackson.

Eliza gives him a look. "Everybody is going to drink that!"

He grabs her ass and gives it a comforting squeeze. "Hey, hey, baby. Don't worry. This shit is perfectly safe to fry."

"But it's all we've got, you crazy sonofabitch!"

The doorbell goes ding-dong and the first guests come piling in from the hallway. It will be Bob Aickman, bare-assed and goggle-eyed on acid, who will eventually trip over the wires that cause the electrical short that starts the tragic fire that consumes the top three floors of the Estate.

Deputy Newcastle operates two official vehicles: an eleven-year-old police cruiser with spider web cracks in the windshield and a bashed-in passenger-side door, and an Alpine snowmobile that, by his best estimate, was likely manufactured during the 1980s. Currently, he's parked in the cruiser on Main Street across from the condemned hulk that is the Frazier Tower. The sun won't set for another forty-five minutes, give or take, but already the shadows are thick as his wife's blueberry cobbler. It's snowing and blowing. Gusts rock the car. He listens to the weather forecast. Going to be cold as hell, as usual. Twenty-seven degrees Fahrenheit and sinking fast. He

unscrews the thermos and has a sip of cocoa Hannah packed in his lunchbox. Cocoa, macaroni salad, and a tuna sandwich on white bread. He loathes macaroni and tuna, loves cocoa, and adores dear Hannah, so it's a wash.

His beat is usually quiet. The geographic jurisdiction extends from the village of Eagle Talon to a fourteen-mile stretch north and south along the Seward Highway. Normally, he deals with drunks and domestic arguments, tourists with flat tires and the occasional car accident.

Then along came this business with Langtree and the slaughterhouse scene at his shack on Midnight Road. A forensics team flew in from Anchorage and did their thing, and left again. Deputy Newcastle still hasn't heard anything from headquarters. Nobody's taking it seriously. Langtree was a nut. Loons like him are a dime a dozen in Alaska. Violence is part of the warp and woof of everyday existence here. Takes a hell of a lot to raise eyebrows among the locals. The deputy is worried, and with good reason.

The angel on his shoulder keeps whispering in his ear. The angel warns him a blood moon is on the rise.

Despite the fact his shift ended at two o'clock, Deputy Newcastle has spent the better part of an hour staring at the entrance of the abandoned Frazier Tower. Should have gotten leveled long ago, replaced by a hotel or a community center, or any old thing. Lord knows the village could use some recreational facilities. Instead, the building festers like a rotten tooth. It's a nest for vermin—animals and otherwise—and a magnet for thrill-seeking kids and ne'er-do-wells on the lam.

Custodian Floyd is supposed to keep the front door covered in plywood. The plywood is torn loose and lying in the bushes. A hole leads into gloom. This actually happens frequently. The aforementioned kids and ne'er-do-wells habitually break into the tower to seek their fun. Deputy Newcastle's cop intuition tells him the usual suspects aren't to blame.

"I'm going in," he says.

"You better not," says MJ. The King of Pop inhabits the back seat, his scrawny form crosshatched by the grilled partition between them. His pale features are obscured in the shade of a slouch hat. He is the metaphorical shoulder-sitting angel.

“Got to. It’s my job.”

“You’re a swell guy, deputy. Don’t do it.”

“Who then?”

“You’re gonna die if you go in there alone.”

“I can call someone. Hendricks will back my play.”

“Can’t trust him.”

“Elam.”

“Your brother is a psychopath.”

“Hmm. Fair enough. I could ring Custer or Pearson. Heck, I could deputize both of them for the day.”

“Look, you can’t trust anyone.”

“I don’t.” Newcastle stows the thermos and slides on his wool gloves. He unclips the twelve-gauge pump action from its rack and shoulders his way out of the cruiser. The road is slick beneath the tread of his boots, the breeze searing cold against his cheek. Snowflakes stick to his eyelashes. He takes a deep breath and trudges toward the entrance of the Frazier Tower. The dark gap recedes and blurs like a mirage.

True Romance isn’t Deputy Newcastle’s favorite movie. Too much blood and thunder for his taste. Oddly, he identifies with the protagonist, Clarence. In times of doubt Elvis Presley manifests and advises Clarence as a ghostly mentor.

The deputy adores the incomparable E, so he’s doubly disconcerted regarding his own hallucinations. Why in the heck does he receive visions of MJ, a pop icon who fills him with dread and loathing?

MJ visited him for the first time the previous spring and has appeared with increasing frequency. The deputy wonders if he’s gestating a brain tumor or if he’s slowly going mad like his grandfather allegedly did after Korea. He wonders if he’s got extra sensory powers or powers from God, although he hasn’t been exposed to toxic waste or radiation, nor is he particularly devout. Church for Christmas and Easter potluck basically does it for him. Normally a brave man, he’s too chicken to take himself into Anchorage for a CAT scan to settle the issue. He’s also afraid to mention his invisible

friend to anyone for fear of enforced medical leave and/or reassignment to a desk in the city.

In the beginning, Deputy Newcastle protested to his phantom partner: “You aren’t real!” and “Leave me alone! You’re a figment!” and so on. MJ had smiled ghoulishly and said, “I wanna be your friend, Deputy. I’ve come to lend you a hand. Hee-hee!”

Deputy Newcastle steps through the doorway into a decrepit foyer. Icicle stalactites descend in glistening clusters. The carpet has eroded to bare concrete. Cracks run through the concrete to the subflooring. A wasteland of fallen ceiling tiles, squirrel nests, and collapsed wiring. He creeps through the debris, shotgun clutched to his waist.

What does he find? An escaped convict, dirty and hypothermic, like in the fall of 2006? Kids smoking dope and spraying slogans of rebellion on the walls? A salmon-fattened black bear hibernating beneath a berm of dirt and leaves? No, he does not find a derelict, or children, or a snoozing ursine.

The Killer awaits him, as the King of Pop predicted.

Deputy Newcastle sees shadow bloom within shadow, yet barely feels the blade that opens him from stem to stern. It is happening to someone else. The razor-sharp tip punches through layers of insulating fabric, enters his navel, and rips upward. The sound of his undoing resonates in the small bones of his ears. He experiences an inexplicable rush of euphoria that is frightening in its intensity, then he is on his knees, bowed as if in prayer. His mind has become so disoriented he is beyond awareness of confusion. His parka is heavy, dragged low by the sheer volume of blood pouring from him. He laughs and groans as steam fills his throat.

The Killer takes the trooper hat from where it has rolled across the ground, dusts away snow and dirt, and puts it on as a souvenir. The Killer smiles in the fuzzy gloom, watching the deputy bleed and bleed.

Deputy Newcastle has dropped the shotgun somewhere along the way. Not that it matters—he has no recollection of the service pistol in his belt, much less the knowledge of how to work such a complicated mechanism. The most he can manage at this point is a dumb, meaningless smile that doesn’t even reflect upon the presence of his murderer.

His final thought isn't of Hannah, or of the King of Pop standing at his side and mouthing the words to "Smooth Criminal," eyes shining golden. No, the deputy's final thought isn't a thought, it is inchoate awe at the leading edge of darkness rushing toward him like the crown of a tidal wave.

A storm rolls in off the sea on the morning of the big Estate Christmas party. Nobody stirs anywhere outdoors except for Duke Pearson's two-ton snow plow with its twinkling amber beacon, and a police cruiser as the deputy makes his rounds. Both vehicles have been swallowed by swirls of white.

Tammy Ferro's fourteen-year-old son Mark is perched at the table like a raven. Clad in a black trenchcoat and exceptionally tall for his tender age, he's picking at a bowl of cereal and doing homework he shirked the previous evening. His mother is reading a back issue of the*Journal of the American Medical Association.* The cover illustration is of a mechanical heart cross-sectioned by a scalpel.

Tammy divorced her husband and moved into the village in September, having inherited apartment 202 from her Aunt Millicent. Tammy is thirty-three but can pass for twenty-five. Lonnie DeForrest's appreciation of her ass aided her in snagging a job at the Caribou Tavern waiting tables. She earned a degree in psychology from the University of Washington, fat lot of good that's done her. Pole dancing in her youth continues to pay infinitely greater dividends than the college education it financed.

She and Mark haven't spoken much since they came to Eagle Talon. She tells herself it's a natural byproduct of teenage reticence, adapting to a radically new environment, and less to do with resentment over the big blowup of his parents' marriage. They are not exactly in hiding. It is also safe to say her former husband, Matt, doesn't know anything about Aunt Millicent or the apartment in Alaska.

Out of the blue, Mark says, "I found out something really cool about Nate Custer."

Tammy has seen Custer around. Impossible not to when everyone occupies the village's only residence. Nice looking guy in his late forties. Devilish

smile, carefree. Heavy drinker, not that that is so unusual in the Land of the Midnight Sun, but he wears it well. Definitely a Trouble with a capital T sort. He goes with that marine biologist Jessica Mace who lives on the fifth. Mace is kind of a cold fish, which seems apropos, considering her profession.

She says, “The glacier tour guide. Sure.” She affects casualness by not glancing up from her magazine. She dislikes the fascination in her son’s tone. Dislikes it on an instinctual level. It’s the kind of tone a kid uses when he’s going to show you a nasty wound, or some gross thing he’s discovered in the woods.

“He survived the Moose Valley Slaughter. Got shot in the head, but he made it. Isn’t that crazy? Man, I never met anybody that got shot before.”

“That sounds dire.” Guns and gun violence frighten Tammy. She doesn’t know if she’ll ever acclimate to Alaska gun culture. However, she is quite certain that she prefers grown men leave her impressionable teen son out of such morbid conversations, much less parade their scars for his delectation. Barbarians aren’t at the gate; they are running the village.

“It happened twenty years ago. Moose Valley’s a small town, even smaller than Eagle Talon. Only thirty people live there. It’s in the interior… You got to fly supplies in or take a river barge.” Mark isn’t looking at her directly, either. He studies his black nails, idly flicking the chipped polish.

“Gee, that’s definitely remote. What do people do there?” Besides shoot each other, obviously.

“Yeah, lame. They had *Pong*, maybe, and that’s it. Nate says everybody was into gold mining and junk.”

“Nate says?”

Mark blushes. “He was a little older than me when it all went down. This ex-Army guy moved in from the Lower Forty-Eight to look for gold, or whatever. Everybody thought he was okay. Turns out he was a psycho. He snapped and went around shooting everybody in town one night. Him and Nate were playing dominoes and the dude pulled a gun out of his pocket. Shot Nate right in the head and left him on the floor of his cabin. Nate didn’t die. Heh. The psycho murdered eleven people before the state troopers bagged him as he was floating downriver on a raft.”

“Honey!”

“Sorry, sorry. The cops *apprehended* him. With a sniper rifle.”

“Did Nate tell you this?”

“I heard it around. It’s common knowledge, Mom. I was helping Tucker and Hendricks get an acetylene bottle into the back of his rig.”

She hasn’t heard this tale of massacre. Of course, she hasn’t made many friends in town. At least Mark is coming out of his shell. Despite the black duds and surly demeanor, he enjoys company, especially that of adults. Good thing since there are only half a dozen kids his age in the area. She’s noticed him mooning after a girl named Lilly. It seems pretty certain the pair are carrying on a rich, extracurricular social life via Skype and text…

“Working on English?” She sets aside her magazine and nods at his pile of textbooks and papers. “Need any help?”

He shrugs.

“C’mon. Watch ya got?”

“An essay,” he says. “Mrs. Chandler asked us to write five hundred words on what historical figure we’d invite to dinner.”

“Who’d you pick? Me, I’d go with Cervantes, or Freud. Or Vivien Leigh. She was dreamy.”

“Jack the Ripper.”

“Oh… That’s nice.”

A young, famous journalist drives to a rural home in Upstate New York. The house rests alone near the end of a lane. A simple rambler painted red with white trim. Hills and woods begin at the backyard. This is late autumn and the sun is red and gold as it comes through the trees. Cool enough that folks have begun to put the occasional log into the fireplace, so the crisp air smells of applewood and maple.

He and the woman who is the subject of his latest literary endeavor sip lemonade and regard the sky and exchange pleasantries. An enormous pit

bull suns itself on the porch a few feet from where the interview occurs. Allegedly, the dog is attack-trained. It yawns and farts.

The journalist finds it difficult not to stare at the old lady's throat where a scar cuts, so vivid and white, through the dewlapped flesh. He is aware that in days gone by his subject used to camouflage the wound with gypsy scarves and collared shirts. Hundreds of photographs and she's always covered up.

Mrs. Jessica Mace Goldwood knows the score. She drags on her Camel No. 9 and winks at him, says once her tits started hitting her in the knees she gave up vanity as a bad business. Her voice is harsh, only partially restored after a series of operations. According to the data, she recently retired from training security dogs. Her husband, Gerry Goldwood, passed away the previous year. There are no children or surviving relatives on record.

"Been a while since anybody bothered to track me down," she says. "Why the sudden interest? You writing a book?"

"Yeah," the journalist says. "I'm writing a book."

"Huh. I kinda thought there might be a movie about what happened at the Estate. A producer called me every now and again, kept saying the studio was 'this close' to green-lighting the project. I was gonna make a boatload of cash, and blah, blah, blah. That was, Jesus, twenty years ago." She exhales a stream of smoke and studies him with a shrewd glint in her eyes. "Maybe I shoulda written a book."

"Maybe so," says the journalist. He notices, at last, a pistol nestled under a pillow on the porch swing. It is within easy reach of her left hand. His research indicates she is a competent shot. The presence of the gun doesn't make him nervous—he has, in his decade of international correspondence, sat among war chiefs in Northern Pakistan and ridden alongside Taliban fighters in ancient half-tracks seized from Russian armored cavalry divisions. He has visited Palestine and Georgia and seen the streets burn. He thinks this woman would be right at home with the hardest of the hard-bitten warriors he's interviewed.

"Life is one freaky coincidence, ain't it though?" She stares into the woods. Her expression is mysterious. "Julie Vellum died last week. Ticker finally crapped out."

“Julie Vellum…” He scans his notes. “Right. She cashed in big time. Author of how many bestselling New Age tracts? Friend of yours?”

“Nah, I despised the bitch. She’s the last, that’s all. Well, there’s that guy who did psychedelic music for a while. He’s in prison for aggravated homicide. Got involved with a cult and did in some college kids over in Greece. Can’t really count him, huh? I’m getting sentimental in my dotage. Lonely.”

“Lavender McGee. He’s not in prison. They transferred him to an institution for the criminally insane. He gets day passes if you can believe it.”

“The fuck is this world coming to? What is it you wanna ask me?”

“I have one question for you.”

“Just one?” Her smile is amused, but sharp-honed by a grief that has persisted for more than the latter half of her long life.

“Just one.” He takes a recorder from his shirt pocket, clicks a button, and sets it on the table between them. “More than one, of course. But this one is the biggie. Are you ready?”

“Sure, yeah. I’m ready.”

“Mrs. Goldwood, why are you alive?”

Wind moves the trees behind the house. A flurry of red and brown leaves funnel across the yard, smack against the cute skirting. A black cloud covers the sun and hangs there. The temperature plummets. Gravel crunches in the lane.

The dog growls, and is on its feet, head low, mouth open to bare many, many teeth. The fur on its back is standing in a ridge. It is Cerberus’s very own pup.

“Oh, motherfucker,” says Jessica Mace Goldwood. She’s got the revolver in her hand, hammer cocked. Her eyes blaze with a gunfighter’s fire as she half crouches, elbows in tight, knees wide. “It’s never over with these sonsofbitches.”

“What’s happening?” The journalist has ducked for cover, hands upraised in the universal sign of surrender. “Jesus H., lady! Don’t shoot me!” He glances over his shoulder and sees a man in the uniform of a popular parcel

delivery service slamming the door of a van and roaring away in a cloud of smoking rubber.

"Aw, don't fret," she says. "Me and Atticus just don't appreciate those delivery guys comin' around." The pit bull snarls and throws himself down at her feet. She uncocks the revolver and tucks it into the waistband of her track pants. "So, young man. Where were we?"

He wipes his face and composes himself. In a hoarse voice he says, "I guess what happened in Alaska doesn't let go."

"Huh? Don't be silly—I smoked that psycho. I hate visitors. You're kinda cute, so I made an exception. Besides, you're gonna pay me for this story, kiddo."

He tries for a sip of lemonade and ice rattles in the empty glass. His hand trembles. She pats his arm and takes the glass inside for a refill. Atticus follows on her heel. The journalist draws a breath to steady himself. He switches off the recorder. A ray of sun burns through the clouds and spotlights him while the rest of the world blurs into an impressionistic watercolor. A snowflake drifts down from outer space and freezes to his cheek.

She returns with a fresh glass of lemonade to find the journalist slumped in the lawn chair. Someone has placed an ancient state trooper's hat on his head and tilted it so that the man's face is partially covered. The crown of the hat is matted with dried gore that has, with the passing decades, indelibly stained the fabric. A smooth, vertical slice begins at the hollow of his throat and continues to belt level. His intestines are piled beneath his trendy hiking shoes. His ears lie upon the table. Steam rises from the corpse.

Atticus growls at the odors of shit and blood.

Jessica gazes at him in amazement. "Goddamnit, dog. *Now* you growl. Thanks a heap." She notices a wet crimson thumbprint on the recorder. She sighs and lights another cigarette and presses PLAY. Comes the static-inflected sound of wind rushing across ice, of snow shushing against tin, of arctic darkness and slow, sliding fog. Fire crackles in the background. These sounds have crept across the span of forty years.

A voice, garbled and muted by interference, whispers, “Jessica, we need to know. Why are you alive?” Snow and wind fill a long gap. Then, “Did you cut your own throat? Did you? Are you dead, Jessica? Are you dead, or are you playing? How much longer do you think you have?” Nothing but static after that, and the tape ends.

Intuition tells her that the journalist didn’t file a plan with his network, that he rolled into the boondocks alone, that when he doesn’t arrive at the office on Monday morning it will be a fulfillment of the same pattern he’s followed countless times previously. The universe won’t skip a beat. A man such as he has enemies waiting in the woodwork, ready to wrap him in a carpet and take him far away. It will be a minor unsolved mystery that his colleagues have awaited since his first jaunt into a war torn region in the Middle East.

She can’t decide whether to call the cops or hide the body, roll the rental car into a ditch somewhere and torch it. *Why, yes, Officer, the young fellow was here for a while the other day. Missing? Oh, dear, that’s terrible…*

“Jack?” she says to the hissing leaves. Her hand is at her neck, caressing the scar that defines her existence. “Nate? Are you out there?”

The sun sets and night is with her again.

Three years, six months, and fifteen days before Dolly Sammerdyke is eviscerated and dropped down a mineshaft, where her bones rest to this very day, she tells her brother Tom she’s moving from Fairbanks to Eagle Talon. She’s got an in with a woman who keeps the books at a shipping company and there’s an opening for an onsite clerk. Tom doesn’t like it. He lived in the village during a stretch in the 1980s when his luck was running bad.

“Listen, kid. It’s a bum deal.”

“Not as if I have a better option,” she says.

“Bad place, sis.”

“Yeah? What’s bad about it? The people?”

“Bad people, sure. Bad neighborhood, bad history. Only one place to live in Eagle Talon. Six-floor apartment building. Ginormus old tenement. Dark, drafty, creepy as shit. It’s a culture thing. People there are oddballs and clannish. You’ll hate it.”

“I’ll call you every week.”

Dolly calls Tom every week until her death. He doesn’t miss her calls at first because he’s landed a gig as a luthier in Nashville and his new girlfriend, an aspiring country and western musician, commands all of his attention these days.

Did the Final Girl do it? Was it this person here or that one over there? You can only laugh at the preposterousness of such conceits. You can only weep. As the omniscient narrator of some antique fairy tale once declaimed: Fool! Rub your eyes and look again!

You will never die—nothing does.

From the journal of Nathan E. Custer as transcribed from the original text by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Anchorage:

I’ve never told anyone the whole truth about Moose Valley, or this recurring dream I’ve suffered in the following years. Probably not a dream; more of a vision. For clarity’s sake, we’ll go with it being a dream. The dream has two parts. The first part is true to life, a memory of events with the tedious details edited from the narrative.

In the true to life part of the dream, Michael Allen and I are playing dominoes in the dim kitchen of my old place in Moose Valley. I’d seen him standing in the yard, a ghostly shape in the darkness, and had invited him to come out of the weather without thinking to ask why he was lurking.

It is fall of ’93, around four in the morning. He’s winning, he always wins at these games—pool, checkers, cards, dominoes—although everybody likes him anyway.

Allen has only been in town a few months. A few years older than me, from back east, also like me. An ex-Army guy, so he’s capable, with an easy

smile and a sharp wit. Long hair, but kempt. Keeps to himself for the most part in a one room cottage by the river. He's passionate about Golden Age comic books and the poetry of James Dickey. I was in the cottage for maybe five minutes once. Dude kept it to a minimum and neat as you please. Gun oil scent, although no guns in view. Yeah.

He pockets my last eleven dollars with a shrug and an apologetic grin. Says, Thanks for the game, and pulls on his orange sock cap and stands. I turn away to grab a beer from the icebox, hair of the dog that bit me, and the bullet passes through my skull above my ear and I'm on the floor, facedown. He squeezes the trigger again and I hear the hammer snap, a dud in the chamber. Or he hadn't reloaded from slaughtering the Haden family across the street. We'll never know. Anyway, I'm unblinking, unresponsive, paralyzed, so he leaves me for dead. The front door slams and sunlight creeps across the tiles and makes the spreading blood shiny.

The second part of the dream is a fantasy cobbled and spliced from real events. I have a disembodied view of everything that happens next.

Allen slips down to the launch and steals a rubber raft. He lets the flow carry him downstream. He's packed sandwiches and beer, and has a small picnic. God, it's a beautiful day. The mountain peaks are white with fresh snow, but the lower elevations are yet green and gold. The air is brisk, only hinting at the bitter chill to come. A beaver circles the raft, occasionally slapping the water with its tail. The crack is like a gunshot. Allen scans the eggshell-blue sky from behind a pair of tinted aviator glasses.

The current gradually picks up as it approaches a stretch of falls and rapids. A black dot detaches from the sun and drops toward the earth. Allen unlimbers the 30.06 bolt action rifle he's stowed under a blanket. His balance is uncertain and the first round pings harmlessly through the fuselage of the police chopper. He ejects the empty and sights again, cool as the ice on the mountains, and this will be a kill shot. The SWAT sniper is a hair quicker and Allen is knocked from the raft. He plunges into the water and sinks instantly. The raft zips over the falls and is demolished.

A sad, tragic case closes.

The fact is, Allen survives for a few minutes. He is a tough, passionless piece of work, a few cells short of Homo sapiens status, and that helps him

experience a brutal and agonizing last few moments on the mortal plane. He is sucked into a vortex and wedged under and between some rocks where he eventually drowns. This is a remote and dangerous area. The cops never recover the body.

Small fish nibble away his fingers, then his face, then the rest of it.

Nemesis

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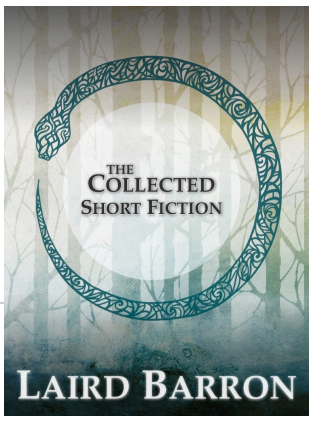

Poe died of rabies, didn't he? Died raving, at any rate.

Here we are at end in a cheap motel along the lost highway. You've been walking for a long time and the time has come to rest. Your sandals are worn through to the bone. Your beard could host sparrows. Your eyes have seen too much.

Sit in the armchair by the table. Here's a tumbler and an unmarked bottle. The bottle should be green with electric lime, but it's black. Pour a shot, set it aside. That's the hammer cocking back. That's the muzzle and the bore of the universe bearing down; that's the naked bulb in the eighty-dollar a night room snapping on. The window frames the world like a television screen. That shadow flowing over the tundra is the moon coming too close to its mother. While all other points of fire wink out, a wandering star sparkles, black flame from a black nozzle magnified by the whiskey glass bottom pressed to your eye. Press RECORD. Time has come to get down to cases.

This room is a microcosm of everything that exists. You are alone with the monkey that rides your back. DO NOT DISTURB has arranged this tête-à-tête. There's no mirror, there's only you and him and you aren't friends. There are, however, questions you've got to ask yourself here at the brink. Let's make it easy. These are yes/no questions. Be honest. Honesty is best.

For a moment back there you got to be a god. There were infinite possibilities. Look at what you did with that split second of omnipotence. Look into the mirror, if you are able. You open your mouth and the mirror shivers and somewhere a supermassive black hole dilates.

"But it wasn't that way at all," you say. "My father killed me when I was a boy."

You sound so sincere.

Despite what we thought the Mayans said, the world did not end in a fiery apocalypse last year and I am drunk as a lord.

The glow of the goldfish in its bowl greets me when I descend the twelve steps into the living room at oh-my-god-thirty in the a.m. intent upon finishing the vodka in the freezer. I'm dying of thirst. Dying of every lack.

The goldfish is named Hercules and it shines in the radiance of a wandering star that falls beneath the edge of icy peaks far to the west. Those peaks, serrated as a fillet knife, are millions of years in the making, as is the star's own brilliance. Hercules is older yet. You may wonder how this could be so, since goldfishes swell to match the dimensions of their confines. Surely such an ancient specimen could swallow a whale here on the eve of the last night of Anno Domini 2013. Hell, it should be enormous enough to gulp down a mid-sized city.

There you have it: I am the custodian of an infernal dreadnaught. I keep it in its tiny prison as a precaution. A check against unfathomable power. So far, so good. I unscrew the cap and drain the vodka dregs and that's better, I'm no longer a man crawling across the desert while vultures circle and circle. I'm rebuilt, remade, a millimeter closer to sanity. I'm in control. Nothing can go wrong.

I regard Hercules, hanging dead in the water like a tiny, unexploded torpedo. Something always goes wrong.

My twelve year-old son Larry is convinced there's trouble. He knows from trouble. The left side of his face is mangled. Phantom of the Opera gruesome, he won't wear the mask Mom knitted him for polite company. The deed occurred two winters ago in the Northern Territories while we checked my trapline. A bonding expedition is how I sold it to Mom. Days and days of trekking through forests on bearpaw snowshoes, nights of heating pork and beans over cheery campfires; a real adventure.

But, damn, the ghost of Yul Brynner must've haunted the machine. It went wrong one afternoon on the shore of Great Slave Lake.

The gray wolf was caught fast in a leghold trap and had frozen to death. Or so Larry thought until it revived and sprang upon him and snapped its red

jaws into his flesh. Destroyed his left eye, almost took his head off, but for me being Johnny on the spot with a shotgun loaded with slugs. Stupid kid should've waited for the all-clear before charging forward. My fault; I should've taught him better. I'll shoot the bastards from a helicopter from now on.

Anyway, the mauling unreeled before me with the slow motion ineluctability of a high speed car crash. The bite and the blast occurred two, maybe three, seconds apart. Fast ain't always as fast as we'd wish. Signal to nerve and my trigger finger twitched. Ka-fucking-BOOM and White Fang got taken in two while my boy, covered in blood, described a snow angel with his convulsions. I could see the circuitry of his brain through the gash where his lovely brown eye had been. He didn't cry. He stared at me with a dreadful calmness as complete and cold as the ice of the lake itself.

The stars came out while I sliced my long john sleeve and wrapped his skull. The rag soaked through, became his red bandanna of courage. The wandering star swung wide across the skinned heavens and filled his black iris with hell.

Larry said,

"Hercules is sick."

Dad's expression was remote as polar snow by the reflected luminance of his iPad screen.

"No, it's not sick. It's the Terror of the Deeps." He always referred to the fish as "it." He referred to all animals as "it." And babies.

"He swims upside down."

"Maybe it's bored."

Larry flicked a penlight over the goldfish bowl.

"Oh, no. Leonardo da Fishie is gone! I thought he was hiding in the candy castle." A tear glittered in the boy's good eye. He took things like this hard, same as his mother.

"Ah, exhibit A. Hercules obviously devoured hapless LDF. Ergo, Hercules isn't sick. In fact, I submit that this is prima facie evidence that it is growing

stronger.”

“I put him in there because Hercules was lonely. They were supposed to be friends.”

“Lemme tell you, son, this isn’t such an unusual way for a friendship to end.”

“His eyes…”

“Eh?” A latticework of diagrams and formulae shivered in Dad’s glasses. He worked at the University of Fairbanks and was always bringing home some quaint and curious jag of arcane lore.

“Dad, his eyes…”

“Windows to the soul. Portholes, in the case of a fish.”

“Damn it, John!” One half of Larry’s face was livid, the other half dead as stone. All those severed nerves, you see. Spit flew when he got excited.

Dad set aside his notes. He made a steeple of his fingers and tapped his nose.

“You ever kill anyone?”

“No.” The softness of the question sobered Larry right up.

“Interestingly enough, I have. With my bare hands, no less. The Marines trained me to do that. In light of this information, perhaps you’d care to reassess our relationship. Unless you prefer dancing on thin ice.”

Larry and Dad were alone in the cabin. Larry’s bothers, Mike and Sam, had gone into town with Mom for Christmas shopping. Larry didn’t think his dad would risk murder, but the old man put the loon in loony and there wasn’t much point in pushing his luck, especially without witnesses.

“Hercules’s eyes are black. Pure black. Something is definitely wrong with him.” Larry’s voice quavered.

Dad thought about that for a few moments.

“There are two possibilities. Either Hercules is shining with the darkness of whatever abyss spawned it, or it acquired a fungal infection from munching Leonardo da Fishie. My money is on door number three: demonic possession.”

Later, when Mom popped into his room for a goodnight kiss, Larry was still brooding. He informed her that he thought Hercules's strange behavior was an omen.

"An omen of what?" Mom said. The shadow of her head moved like a Medusa-coil on the wall.

Larry shrugged.

Mom smiled sadly and smoothed a lock of hair from his brow.

"Y'know, your father has owned a goldfish ever since we were in high school. Same bowl, same name. This has to be Hercules the Thousandth. There's something Freudian going on, I am sure. Don't antagonize him. He's not stable and he doesn't like you very much."

"Why does he hate me?"

"He doesn't hate you. You just annoy him terribly."

"Is it because of my face?"

"Oh, sweetie. Your father is a simple man. He's too dumb to feel guilty. You give him an inferiority complex."

"He's a world class scientist."

"Doesn't mean he isn't dumb enough to fear what he misunderstands."

"But why?"

"He thinks you're special. That frightens him. Brave men such as your father are frightened of the smallest things. Kind of like how elephants have a phobia of mice."

"That's just a myth!"

"Trust me on this. I'm giving you five dollars for your allowance, by the way."

"Oh. How am I special, Mom?"

"You're not, dear."

"Let me be clear, there is no Machine," Director Mallory said to close his remarks at the Star Chamber deposition. This emergency hearing was in

response to an international crisis that appeared to be rapidly mutating into a global apocalypse. Blame had to be apportioned and attributed. Heads were going to roll, and how. The Director snapped his briefcase shut and strode out a side exit. He skipped lunch at the grill that day, became quite scarce indeed.

The Machine activated again six hours later and its effects were irreversible.

But by that time, when shit hit the fan for real, the Director was already aboard an emergency capsule speeding toward the moon. He and ninety-seven other bureaucrats, technicians, scientists, and prostitutes survived on a base hidden in a crater on the dark side for nineteen months. Eventually, they all perished of starvation, or mayhem induced by a cabin fever type syndrome. He went last—blew the station to smithereens with mining explosives and then unzipped his environmental suit to vacuum and watched his life boil away. He was lonely, not sorry. No one back on Earth cared. He'd been long forgotten.

We became aware that mischief was afoot long before it manifested into anything concrete. Much as I detected aberrations within my own body prior to the cancer diagnosis. What a life. Larry beats cancer and it bites me on the ass, among several other places.

Ah well. Where was I?

This colorless shroud had begun to spread beyond the simple colonies in the earth, contaminating the highest rungs of the ecological ladder. It had begun to creep into the collective consciousness of humanity. A psychic stain. We read this in the white gaps between the lines of news reports, heard it whispered on the garbled short wave transmissions of my old ham radio. A farmer in Akron, an astronomer in Barrow, another week a Greenpeace scientist in Newfoundland. As yet, inchoate. Soon this would change.

Then, pandemonium. Then, endgame.

I had nightmares. The cancer intensified and so did the dreams. I suspected it might be a form of precognition, but reversed into the past. One night,

Hercules broke his silence of decades and began to communicate with me via telepathy. He warned me and warned. I dragged my feet and upped my booze prescription. Who listens to a fish?

As weeks passed, the scenarios changed. In a panic, I called my boss at three a.m. to relay the latest from the psychic front.

The Director said, “What did you see?”

“It was grotesque. There was this primordial goo—”

“Goo?”

“Not actually goo, more of a jelly. None of us could decide if it was some kind of fungus, or an invertebrate. Slimy.”

“Perhaps a snail without the shell, a jellyfish?”

“Jellyfish. This slime covered everything—the ground, highways, skyscrapers, mountains, everything. And it was… aggressive. Not intelligent, but definitely aggressive. Sensitive to light, sound, movement. People were fairly safe unless they started talking or moving around. Then this slime would crawl up after them, attracted to the commotion, and find them wherever they tried to hide. Horrible. This one scientist type kept saying the organism had been here forever, that it ate the dinosaurs, that it lived in a dormant state until something triggered its active cycle. That it represented evolution come full circle. We built this time machine, except it wasn’t exactly a time machine, more like a machine that tapped different dimensional frequencies, and opened a gate to the end of the Jurassic and saw the slime appear. Dinosaurs were stampeding through an underground tunnel and it bottled them up and we heard them dying. Complete crap, I know, but damn if it didn’t make sense. Parts are fuzzy, I don’t remember all the details.” I ran out of steam. “Pretty wild, yeah?”

“Yes. I want the truth. How did you—How could you know this?”

“Know what?”

“Drop the bullshit. Who’s feeding you information? Don’t give me anymore garbage about it being a dream.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Yes I will. We’ve seen everything, haven’t we?”

I spilled, and man, it was a relief to finally tell someone about that damnable goldfish-cum-deathgod.

The Director let it hang for a long time. When he finally spoke, his tone was deadly calm. “John, I’m sending a car.”

“Why?”

“You’ll be taken into a field and shot. It’s for the best.”

“Ha, ha?” I said.

“Kidding. Emergency meeting.”

The Director wasn’t kidding, as it turns out. At least they made it appear to be natural causes. Poor Gladys had suffered enough.

“But it wasn’t that way at all,” you say. “My father killed me when I was a child. He shot me in the back while we were out moose-hunting. Watched me kick and squirm in the slimy leaves while I kept trying to catch my breath and eventually bled out.”

You are nineteen. She is thirty and far from home, a Georgia peach who’s taken it upon herself to divest you of your virginity. She’s naked against the goose down comforter. Coals are banked in the potbellied stove. The blizzard is well into its third evening. The survival-shack is a vanishing speck on rim a vast snowy plain. Its windows are candy ice, its door frozen shut. The wick of the kerosene lamp burns low.

She places your hand against her sex, slides your fingers deep into her.

“Feel the shape of me.”

You feel the shape of her, all right. Your body is green-lighted across the board, five-by-five, all systems go and awaiting the firing solution. However what blooms in your consciousness isn’t an overheated reaction to her musky slickness, it’s the howling void of the storm that opens from a pinhole to obliterate your rationale thought, then overcome the solar system, the galaxy, and everything else.

The disjunction between flesh and thought only lasts a half-dozen ticks of the seconds-hand of the all-weather watch you wear on a string around your neck. Yet each infinitesimal pulse from its electronic braincase jangles the plexus of nerves around your heart and there's a bifurcation of reality. You are shattered and remade. Six beats over a span of sixty-million light years—your distilled consciousness elongated into a harpoon that pierces the corpus callosum of the universe. The wounded vista is a nightmare of nightmares; it is not dissimilar to gazing into the gaping pit of your own eye socket blown to impossible dimensions. And inside that cavern? A light that is darkness beams forth. Hideous red glow, disintegrating glare, death ray of the soul.

You will later discover that thousands of people across the world shared this precise experience at the precise same moment. Most of these people immediately resorted to graphic forms of self-annihilation.

Not you.

Your hair will go white from the vision, although when people ask what you saw out there, you'll only smile and change the subject. You'll have mastered the fine art of disassociation and forgetting. Booze will help. Insanity will help too. Mom lied—you are special.

You snap back to local reality and the woman drags you atop her. She doesn't notice that you've changed, been rearranged from the cells up. After you've made love, the Georgia peach kisses your cheek, tracing the old, bitter scar that marks the very core of you, just as a tree's rings spiral ever tighter. She asks how it happened. She's intoxicated with your imperfection.

You tell her about the neighbor who kept a kennel of racing huskies and how when you were ten your father made you enter the lot as the neighbor was hitching his team. Dad knew you were piss-in-your-pants-scared of dogs. He wanted to make a man of you, force you to confront your fear. Eighteen sled dogs, snapping and barking in madness to run as a pack across the tundra. You were small for ten and maybe a couple of them mistook you for prey and the others simply operated from instinct. You slipped, one of them nipped your arm, and then all devolved unto frenzy. They sank their fangs and pulled in opposite directions and there was a bucket of blood dashed upon the snow. Here came your dad's boots, and the

mukluks of the neighbor, frantically jigging the way men will to stamp out a fire. They drove the enraged huskies away from your tattered ragdoll self. You remember observing the debacle from on high as a floating astral projection. Curious, yet detached from the moment.

Your Georgia peach listens attentively and when your words trail into nothingness, she asks what happened to the dogs, to your dad, to the neighbor. The lamp wick folds in upon itself and all is darkness.

“We went to hell.”

Each day I begin with the basic facts of my existence:

My name is Gladys. I am fifty-seven and a widow. Two of my three sons are also dead. It would be better if the eldest were gone, too. Poor aim is to blame. There’d been a flaw in the lens of the scope and the kill-shot went wide.

Larry is dead to me. Is that enough?

I am caretaker of a goldfish. His name is Hercules and he owned my husband until the day John passed away. The fish is all that I have left of my previous life. Won’t be long until humankind in general can say that.

Red light comes through the window set high in the uppermost wall of the white room. Food is delivered on a tray through a slot in the metal door. There is a toilet, sink, and cot. Hercules in his domain upon a wooden folding table. My canvas and paints are long gone. My old books were spirited away as I lay in drugged stupor. The doctors don’t visit anymore. Nor do the plainclothes policemen, nor the government agents. Once in a while, whispers filter through the intercom.

The voice says, how could you?

I lie on my cot and stare at the red light. I wonder what is left out there in the world. Why does anyone even bother with it? Humans are genetically predisposed to contest territory, even if the prize is irradiated tracts of scorched earth. We are born to fight, bred to kill. We are the makers of plague, the detonators of artificial suns.

Mike and Sam were perfect. Larry got cancer when he was young. Never proven, but we always suspected it had something to do with his father's tour of duty in Afghanistan. Maybe John didn't get the gas mask on in time and he unwittingly huffed a few breaths of some chemical agent or other, something that replicated itself through the blood and warped our firstborn. Yes, whatever it was, it came back for John. And now I'm alone.

We noticed the cancer only after it took Larry's left eye and began nibbling on his brain. The operation to remove the tumor was a gruesome success. The Elks Club paid for everything. Post-op, nothing was ever the same in our little Information Age family unit.

Larry's soul shriveled into to a wizened monstrosity. A cannibal gnome, invested and diabolical. I saw it in its reptilian elegance, peeping out from his heavy-lidded gaze. Gone was the sweetness, snuffed was the affection. He exhibited a sharp intellect that impressed teachers and doctors alike. They assumed he was bound for greatness. He fooled everyone—psychologists, teachers, friends, extended family—except for us. John and I recognized the coldness, the calculating edge to his new nature, and we were afraid. The kid became a liar and a manipulator. He made up a dozen convincing tales of how he lost the eye and deployed them with a conniving genius against suitable targets. He wanted to hurt us, especially his father. Why? I don't know. Perhaps he had something in common with all those assholes who climb mountains for the fuck of it. Perhaps the devil was in him. Perhaps my boy is the Antichrist.

I tried to keep the peace and failed. The feud between Larry and his father took on the spectacular excesses of the US/Soviet Cold War era. There were moments I feared John's temper would get the better of him and he'd smother the boy in his sleep. Dear God, now I wish he'd done it.

Red light keeps on creeping along the wall. Still no shadows, only the light. The intercom crackles and there is a long bleed of static. Someone begins whistling.

What year is this? I don't remember.

However, I do remember the instant it all crystallized for me: Halloween night, 2013. We put together a haunted house in the basement and invited the boys' classmates and a bunch of kids from the neighborhood. John

played Dr. Moreau, decked in a ratty lab coat and a panama hat, intent upon convincing the gaggle of “young entrepreneurs” to invest in his latest mad experiment. Meanwhile, I acted the role of an escaped bird-woman who’d enlisted the tykes to overthrow the good doctor and free the beast-people trapped in his laboratory. Twenty-five diminutive ghouls, goblins, witches, and Tinker Bells thumped down the stairs and piled into the drafty confines of the basement. After a brief tour of the various props (the radioactive scorpions and candy cockroaches were not to be missed!), Moreau gave his doomed spiel and was promptly slaughtered by his latest and greatest creation, the Alpine Wildman, a hybrid brute formerly known as Morris the Accountant. Reverend Custer played Morris with grandiose flourishes. The grizzled elder delighted in his slobbering and snarling role. He was a hell of a fellow, our right reverend.

Of course, Dr. M wasn’t so easily defeated. Only by finding and destroying his brain, the phylactery of his evil spirit, could there be true peace on the Isle. The brain was a pink and black piñata John and the boys fashioned from newspaper, glue, and paint. Damned thing hardened into a cement block and none of the kids could perforate it with the beating stick (the doctor’s cane) despite whaling on it with concentrated savagery. Happy young faces darkened and a few tears were shed until supermom Becky Champion, ever the quick-thinker, cried out, That’s not how ye attack a brain of quality! and tore the piñata in twain so its sweet innards were cast to the ground. The ensuing scrum over butterscotch lozenges and chocolate raisins became so violent so quickly that the adults gawped in astonishment while tiny fingers were stomped and adorable pug noses squashed by bony little elbows. The children hissed and clawed each other with the ferocity of alley cats.

I spied Larry on the edge of the fray, smiling with the evil wisdom of an ancient puppeteer, hands clasped before him. He’d dressed as the Phantom of the Opera and the mask partially obscured his expression. He met my glance and nodded. Then he reached up and pried open the lid of his dead eye.

Hideous red light.

A few years before The Whimper (as some cheerfully allude to the apocalypse), Dad and you achieved détente. You started talking again, going to the bar during football season, barbeques in the summer, and that sort of thing. Should've guessed something was wrong. Cancer of the everything, in this case. But you didn't catch on.

He got trashed on boilermakers one night and told you about a camera he and some other scientists invented to take pictures of prehistoric Earth. Snapshots of the Cryptozoic? Absurd, right? Hell, that was only a piece of the puzzle. He looked around the bar real furtive-like and whispered that there was a sequence of photos cataloguing the entire solar system during roughly the same epoch. Black classification material; the sort of secrets men got themselves disappeared over if they spilled the beans. He'd drunk so much, he'd come around the mountain to a grim sobriety.

You said you couldn't get anywhere near understanding of the theory and he said that was okay, the eggheads didn't either. This was found art, son. Extra Terrestrial Technology abandoned during the last ice age. Geologists stumbled upon some funky equipment and semi-decipherable schematics at the heart of the Knik Glacier. The government swooped in to excavate and transport the works to a laboratory buried three quarters of a mile beneath Lazy Mountain. Dad's team spent eight years on the project. They were like the blind men and the elephant. It was big and dangerous, they could agree. There were unpleasant implications regarding humanity's link on the food chain. The eggheads agreed upon that too.

He mentioned nightmares. His eyes gleamed with tears and animal terror. Sinewy, gristly, fevered; he was at once the picture of a dockyard scrapper and fragile as tissue paper. Oppenheimer's cancerous ghost. He wept on your shoulder, apologized for letting you get your face chewed off, apologized for every miserly little crime he'd perpetrated against you, and you forgave him.

Here's the deal for all you finger-waggers and tisk-tiskers: after the old man kicked, yes, you had a go at astral projection. You got fucked up beyond all recognition and staggered out past the Nome seawall and did your thing—sat like a yogi and meditated upon the destruction of the world. You visualized the worst possible shit your febrile mind could conceive of, and after a few fruitless minutes, dusted yourself off and walked to the

Polar Saloon for a beer. Earth remained very much intact despite your efforts.

Didn’t it?

Yes, the whole goddamned mess is my fault. Gladys knew there was something wrong with that boy. She begged me to have him locked away after the incident at his last school. The high-powered shrink we hired said as much. I wouldn’t listen, wouldn’t see, and wouldn’t act on my conscience. I could’ve committed him, could’ve killed him, a hundred times over. She would’ve backed my play all the way to the bitter end. Hacked up the body and fed it to the chickens.

In retrospect, if I’d let the Big Bad Wolf eat him, everything would’ve been different. Sure, I’d still be dead. Some of you’d be around. Some of you’d have kids of your own by now. Grandkids, even. One thing in my defense: the little fucker was a lot brighter than I’d reckoned. Almost enough to make a father proud.

Oh, Gladys. You were right, although I’ll be dipped if I ever saw his eye glow with hellfire. I mean, come on. We put you in the hatch for a reason. Worst part of it is, I knew what was going to happen. Unfettered access to the Project hath its uses, and—contrary to what some might believe—I’m not a total idiot. One night, I sneaked into the lab and calibrated the Machine to a much narrower set of parameters than we’d ever attempted, and it worked, after a fashion.

Compared to observing dinosaurs being consumed by tidal waves of acid jelly, these images were prosaic: Larry was sitting lotus on an ice sheet—above it, actually; he floated two or three feet off the ground. Distortion occurred all around him. I figured it was quantum interference as the device sifted through infinite possible universes to home in on our future.

No. It was Larry in all his glory. He’d made the abstract leap that the Machine was absolutely unnecessary to unlock the door and throw it wide. Anyone could’ve done it if they thought the right thoughts in the exact order. I don’t understand why it had to be him. Outside of a couple of bad breaks, he had such a happy childhood.

I think the shithead killed my fish.

“But it wasn’t that way at all,” you say. “My father killed me when I was a child. He allowed me to be eaten a pack of sled dogs. I lived for three days on life support, then he gave the word and someone pulled the plug.”

The Machine may or may not be a metaphor for our troubled times. Larry, its operator, is the everyman philosophers have dreamed of, warned us against.

What, precisely, did the Machine do? From the top: The Machine

A) Opened a doorway into prehistoric Earth/Signaled an alien invasion

B) Activated a battery of satellites that bombarded the planet with X-rays and killed everyone on the West Coast, precipitating WWIII.

C) Activated a seismic occurrence that detached the West Coast from the continental USA and killed everyone, precipitating WWIII.

D) None of the above.

E) Something worse.

If you went with E, you are a gold star student.

“But it wasn’t that way at all,” you say. “My father killed me when I was a child. He pushed me over the bow of our riverboat as we floated the Yentna river. The muddy water is thirty feet deep and I sank without a scream.”

It’s a gorgeous fall evening in Palmer, Alaska. Hay dust hangs in the golden twilight. Blue clouds scrim the peaks of the Chugach Mountains. Scattered lights blink across the long sweep of the town. A soccer game is in progress on the high school field. The league championship is at stake.

Because there are inviolable rules regarding the temporal matrix, I won’t tell you who I am. Nor shall I reveal the date, except to say it’s the future.

There are infinite futures, but only this one is yours. I can’t tell you whether the invasion comes from outer space, or from the depths of the Earth. All I can tell you is that Mankind has eleven minutes and thirty-three seconds remaining in its geologically brief reign as terrestrial apex predator.

Boo, and hoo.

Flash forward ninety-nine years. Sorry to say no one is missing you. Any of you.

Somewhere in the middle of the chaos, Larry lugged Hercules down to Settler’s Bay and dumped him into the water. The authentic Hercules, mind you. The goldfish that ended up in a bowl in Larry’s mother’s cell was a fake.

Naturally, the fish began to grow at an exponential rate, as Larry’s dad always feared would be the case. And, naturally, when it achieved sufficient mass, it swallowed a Russian trawler on the Bering Sea. The first of many trawlers. This incident ultimately led to whole fleets being consumed. No maritime nation was spared.

Meanwhile, the rockets’ red glare, and the miasma of chemical weapons, and so on. By the time Hercules got around to wreaking its vengeance upon the world, there was nothing around except millions of square miles of virgin forest. It opened its maw and gulped down the whole enchilada anyhow. Grabbed its own tail and swallowed hard.

Existence blinked into oblivion and that lasted for a couple billion years or a billionth of one second until a pinpoint of ultra-condensed matter in a sea of darkness cracked open and vomited forth the contents of a goldfish’s last supper. Here we go again.

Jaws Of Saturn

This version taken from *The Beautiful Thing That Awaits Us All and Other Stories*, 2013

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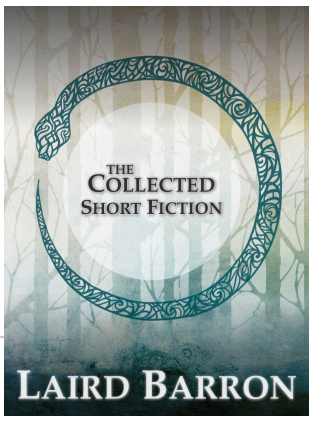


1

"The other night I dreamt about this lowlife I used to screw," Carol said. She and Franco were sitting in the lounge of the Broadsword Hotel, a monument to the Roaring Twenties situated on the west side of Olympia. Most of its tenants were economically strapped or on the downhill slide toward decrepitude, not unlike the once grand dame herself. Carol lived on the sixth floor in a single bedroom flat with cracks running through the plaster and a rusty radiator that groaned and ticked like it might explode and turn the apartment into a flaming wreck. "I mean, yeah, I hooked up with plenty of losers before I met you. Marvin was scary. And ugly as three kinds of sin. He busted kneecaps for a living. Some living."

Franco flipped open his lighter and set fire to a cigarette. He dropped the lighter into the pocket of his blazer. He took a drag and exhaled. Franco did not live in The Broadsword. Happily, he lived across town in a smaller, modern apartment building where the elevators worked and the central heating didn't rely on a coal-fed furnace. He decided not to remind her that he too damaged people on occasion, albeit only in defense of his employer. Franco didn't look like muscle—short and trim, his hair was professionally styled and his clothes were tailored. His face was soft and unscarred. He didn't have scars because he'd always been better with his guns and knives than his enemies were with theirs. Franco said, "Marvin Cortez? Oh, yeah. My boss was friends with him. If this goon scared you so much, why'd you stick around?"

"I dunno, Frankie. 'Cause it turned me on for a while, I guess. Who the hell knows why I do anything?" She pushed around her glass of slushed ice cubes and vodka so it caught the light coming through the window and

multiplied it on the tablecloth. This was late afternoon. The light was heavy and reddish orange.

“Okay. What happened in the dream?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Huh.”

“Huh, what?”

“Dreams are messages from the subconscious. They’re full of symbols.”

“You get a shrink degree I don’t know about?”

“No, my sister worked as a research assistant in a clinic. Where were you?”

“In bed. The whole bed was on a mountain, or something. Marvin stood at the foot of the bed and there was a drop off. The wind blew his hair around, but it didn’t touch me. I was pretty scared of the cliff, though.”

“Why?”

“My bed was practically teetering on the edge, dumbbell.”

“This Marvin guy. Did he do anything?”

“He stared at me—and he was too big. Granted, Marvo really was a hulking dude, Ron Perlman big and ugly, but this was extreme, and I got the impression he would’ve turned into a giant if the dream had lasted longer. His expression weirded me out. I realized it wasn’t really him. Looked like him, except not. More like a mask and it changed as I watched. He was turning into someone else entirely and I woke up before it completely happened.”

Franco nodded and tapped his cigarette on the edge of the ashtray. “Clearly you’ve got feelings for this palooka.”

“Don’t be so jealous. He skipped on me. Haven’t heard from the jerk in years. Weirdest part about the dream is when I opened my eyes the bedroom was pitch black. Except… the closet door opened a bit and this creepy red light came through the crack. Damndest thing. I’m still half zonked, so it’s all unreal at first. Then I started to freak. I mean, there’s nothing in the closet to make a red glow, and the light itself made my hairs prickle. Something was really, really wrong. Then the door clicked shut and the

room went dark again. I'd drunk *waaay* too many margaritas earlier, so I fell asleep."

"You never woke up in the first place," he said. "Dream within a dream. The red light was your alarm clock. Nothing mysterious or creepy about that."

Carol gave him a look. She wore oversized sunglasses that hid her eyes, but the point was clear. She snapped her fingers until a waiter came over. She ordered a rum and coke and made him take the vodka away. "Thing is, this got me thinking. I realize I've been having these dreams all week. I just keep forgetting."

"Your boyfriend in all of them?" Franco tried not to sound petulant. His vodka was down to the rocks and he hadn't asked the waiter for another.

"Not only him. Lots of other people. My mom and dad. A girlfriend from high school that got killed in a crash. My grandparents. Everybody guest starring in my dreams is dead. Except for Marvo—and hell, for all I know he bit the dust. He who lives by the sword and all that."

"This is true," Franco said, thinking of the time a guy swung a machete at his head and missed.

Carol glanced at her watch. She picked up her prim little handbag. "Let's go fuck. Karla's doing my hair later."

2

He stripped her in a half-dozen expert movements and had her crossways on the low, narrow bed, a pillow under her hips because he wanted to work her over with a vengeance. His blood boiled after their conversation regarding her old goon boyfriend. She was voluptuous as a '50s pinup and white as milk and her body amazed him. He held her hips and pushed toward climax while she cried out, shoulders and head suspended off the mattress, her fingers twisted in the sheets. He drove, and the bed moved an inch or two with each thrust, adding grooves to the warped and stained floorboards. Then, he came, crashing the bed with enough force to surely jolt the lights in the lower apartment. She swung herself upright and her expression was that of an ecstatic. He met her eyes in the gloom and his

brain became jelly; it felt as if it might drain through his nose, suctioned by some force at once ancient and familiar and beyond his comprehension. The iris of her left eye was oblong, out of plumb. It seemed to elongate and slide around like the deformed bubbles in a lava lamp, and for several seconds every piece of furniture, the apartment walls, its doors and fixtures, were distorted, undulating in a way that made him sick in the stomach. Then it passed and he flopped on his back, spent and afraid.

Carol climbed atop him and kissed his mouth. Her breath was hot. Her lips moved wet and swollen against his, “Well, Jesus. Aren’t you a voyeuristic sonofabitch.” She reached down and her petite fist partially encircled him. She slowly put him back inside her and had her way, mouth against his ear now. He closed his eyes and the vertigo subsided, and he lay in a semi stupor while his body reacted.

When it finally ended, Carol lighted two cigarettes. She gave him one and then dialed her friend the hairdresser and cancelled her appointment. She slurred like she did after the fifth or sixth cocktail.

Franco smoked his cigarette without enjoying it, his mind ticking with the possibilities of what he’d witnessed. She curled against him, her nails digging into the muscles of his chest. He said, “I think something odd is going on with you.”

“Mmm? I feel pretty damned fine.”

“Have you been taking drugs? You doing X?”

“Are you trying to piss me off?” She smiled and blew smoke at him.

“I’m trying to decide what I think. You’re acting different.” He didn’t know what to say about her bizarre iris and figured keeping his mouth shut was the best course for the moment.

“Hmm. I’ve been seeing a hypnotist. Trying to break this smoking habit.”

“Uh, did you happen to think that might be the reason you’ve had lousy dreams lately? Go screwing around in your brain and God knows what’ll happen.”

“Hypnotism is harmless. All that stuff about them making you cluck like a chicken or do stupid tricks is bullshit. He puts me in a light trance. I’m aware of everything the whole time.”

Franco rubbed the vein pulsing in his temple. “Who’s this hypnotist.”

“Phil Wary. An old dude. Lives upstairs. He was a magician back in the 1970s.”

“This is great.”

“It’s so-so. I paid him three hundred bucks. I’ve cut back to half a pack a day, but sheesh, it could be better. That’s what I’m saying—sure as shit isn’t a cure for cancer.”

“Okay,” he said. He didn’t think anything was okay, and in fact had already made up his mind to pay Phil Wary a visit and set the coot straight. Anybody messing with Franco’s girl was in peril of falling from a rooftop.

Franco dreamed of standing in a hallway. He was naked and smelled of sex and bitter perfume. The hallway was dark except at the far end where a pair of brassy elevator doors shone, illuminated by an unseen source. He walked toward the doors and they slid apart. He entered the elevator. It was tight and dim. The doors shut. A panel of glowing buttons floated in the sudden darkness. He pressed the L and waited. The elevator moved, silent and frictionless, and with a sense of tremendous speed and he screamed as his body became weightless and his shoes drifted several inches from the floor. He was trapped in a coffin-shaped capsule rocketing into zero g orbit. The control panel flickered and its numerals blackened and popped and died. The overhead strip emitted a hideous red light that caused his skin to smoke and char where it touched. The light dripped like oil, like acid dissolving him.

When the doors opened he stumbled into the empty lobby of The Broadsword Hotel. Yet the chamber was far too vast, and in the distance one of the walls had collapsed. It was cold, and the gloom thick with a sense of ruin. Furniture lay in broken heaps, and tiles of the vast marble floor were smashed, pieces scattered, and everywhere, curtains and streamers of cobwebs and dust. The tooth of the moon shone through the skylight dome. Carol stood hipshot in its sickly beam. She too was naked except for a silvery necklace, and panties that gleamed white against her delectable buttocks. Her figure was unutterably erotic in its slickness and ripe strength and quivering vulnerability, a Frazetta heroine made flesh. Her head craned toward one of the support columns, arm raised in a defensive

gesture. She was a voluptuous conceptualization of Fay Wray transported to some occult dimension, gaping at an off screen terror.

A shadow moved across the floor and obliterated Carol's paralyzed figure. It stretched unto colossal dimensions until its clawed edge overlapped Franco's feet and he raced into the elevator that was no longer an elevator, but an endless tunnel, or a throat.

3

Franco lay in bed alone until noon. This was his first vacation in two years from his millionaire charge, Jacob Wilson. Wilson had jetted off to Paris for the week with his girlfriend of the moment and Leonard and Vernon, the senior bodyguards.

He didn't have any fear of confined spaces, but today the elevator ride was harrowing. He loosened his tie to alleviate a feeling of suffocation. A middle-aged woman in an enveloping dress crowded him and he sweated and squeezed the bridge of his nose and breathed shallowly until the lift thudded to a halt and squealed open a full ten seconds later.

Despite his rather mundane and admittedly coarse occupation, Franco enjoyed a good, thick book, and was enamored of classical architecture. The hotel had become a hobby. Almost a century old, and enormous, its caretakers kept alive certain elements and traditions not often present in its modern counterparts. There were at least two sub levels, one of which hosted a barbershop, international newspaper kiosk, cigar shop, and a gentleman's club called The Red Room, this latter held over from speakeasy days. On the ground floor was the lounge, the Oak & Shield restaurant, a largely defunct nightclub called The Owl, and the Arden Grand Ballroom. There were galas every few months and he'd vowed to accompany Carol to one in the near future. Franco was an elegant dancer, comfortable waltzing to a big band.

He went to the lounge and sat at the end of the deserted bar furthest from the double doors and the sun streaming through the windows overlooking the hillside and Capitol Lake far below, and across the way, the Capitol Dome itself, a cracked and grimy edifice that somehow retained its grandeur despite years of neglect. He ordered a Bloody Mary, followed

immediately by a double vodka. He lighted a cigarette and pressed his hand to his eyes while he smoked.

Franco had become a regular at the lounge these past months since his dalliance with Carol. The staff knew who he worked for and when he dropped a hint about his interest in resident Phil Wary, the white-suited bartender disappeared, then returned with a hotel business card, Mr. Wary's apartment and phone numbers scrawled on the reverse. Franco glanced at the card, then burned it in the ashtray as a courtesy. He left a fifty on the bar when he finally dragged himself off the stool and went in search of answers. He buzzed Mr. Wary's apartment, then he unfolded his cell and tried the phone number.

Someone picked up and breathed heavily. "What?" The accent was foreign to Franco, although it reminded him of the old Christopher Lee Dracula movies.

"Mr. Wary, hey. Could I have a few minutes of your time? I'm downstairs __"

"I heard you buzzing my intercom. I hate that buzzing. That brash, persistent noise drills straight through my eardrum. No, I think you sound like an oaf, a knuckle dragger. A second generation Italian mongrel, perhaps."

Franco made a fist with his free hand and squeezed until his knuckles cracked. "Very sorry, sir. I just need five minutes. Maybe less. You know a friend of mine. Carol—"

Mr. Wary breathed into the phone. He made an odd noise in his throat. "Then I am convinced I am not interested in your company. My business with her is not for you. Goodbye."

The line went dead. Franco stared at his cell for a several moments. He carefully folded and put it away. He cracked the knuckles of his right hand. It was a long climb to the seventh floor, but there was no chance of his risking the elevator again. He felt homicidal enough without exacerbating his dire mood with an outbreak of latent claustrophobia. By the fourth floor he'd come to regret his decision. His legs were soft from spending too many hours on his ass in limousines and holding down barstools. He'd given up weight lifting and jogging. The endless columns of booze and

stacks of unfiltered cigarettes made his sporadic appearances at the gym painful.

He hesitated at Mr. Wary's door to try the knob—locked. He wiped his brow with the silk handkerchief in his breast pocket. Mr. Wary's apartment lay near the stairwell at the far end of the corridor opposite the elevator. The passages in The Broadsword Hotel were slightly wider and taller than typical of such buildings, rounded and ribbed at the peak in a classical manner. Gauzy light filled the window alcove above the stairwell. Shadows stretched long fingers across the carpet and most of the hallway remained in gloom. A fly complained in a darkened overhead light globe.

Franco tucked away the handkerchief and slipped his stiletto from its ankle sheath. He never carried a pistol when off duty. There wasn't much reason to—unlike thugs such as Carol's ex, he didn't need to moonlight as an enforcer. His time off was free and uncomplicated.

Mr. Wary hadn't engaged the deadbolt, so Franco easily jimmied the lock and pushed through the door. The apartment was cramped and hot and smelled of must and moldering paper. Centered in the living area was a leather couch, matching armchairs and a pair of ornate floor lamps, all from a bygone era. Mr. Wary owned numerous paintings of foreign pastorals, vine-choked temples and ziggurats, and men and women in peculiar dress. In a corner was an antique writing desk and above its hutch, poster advertisements of magic shows. Several were illustrations of a man in fanciful robes and bejeweled turban, presumably Mr. Wary himself, presiding over various scenes of prestidigitation that generally featured buxom assistants in low cut blouses.

A yellow cat hissed at Franco's approach and darted behind the coach.

"So it's like this, is it?" Mr. Wary leaned against the frame of the entrance to the kitchen. Short and brutish, his silver and black hair touched the collar of his expensive white dress shirt. His craggy face was powdered white, his eyes deeply recessed so they glinted like those of a calculating animal. His eyelids were painted blue and his lips carmine. He wore baggy pants and sandals that curved up at the toe. He sneered at Franco, baring a full set of sharp white teeth. "This wasn't wise of you."

“Hello, Phil,” Franco said, bouncing the knife in his hand. He casually reached back and pulled the door closed. “As I was saying, we really need to have a discussion about Carol. You’ve been trying to help her quit smoking, I hear. Your methods seem unorthodox. She’s acting squirrely.”

“Her treatment is no concern of yours. You’d do well to depart before matters go too far.”

Franco bent and sheathed his blade. He straightened and cracked his knuckles and took a couple of steps further into the room. “Yes, yes, it does in fact concern me. I don’t like how she’s acted lately. I think you’ve fucked with her head, got her hooked on dope, I dunno. But I plan to figure it out.”

“Fool. Love is a poison in that regard. It robs men of their common sense, inveigles them to pursue their own damnation. If it allays your worry, I promise no drugs are involved. No coercion. A touch of chicanery, yes.”

“That doesn’t sound very nice.”

“You’re not a complete barbarian. You comprehend simple words and phrases.”

Franco’s smile sharpened and he moved slowly toward Mr. Wary, sliding his belt free of his pants loops as he went. “Keep talking, old man. I might enjoy this after all.”

“She has a virus of the mind and it’s rather transmittable, I’m afraid.” Mr. Wary squinted at him. He nodded. “Ah, that’s who you are. Such an interesting coincidence. I know your employer. His late, lamented Uncle Theodore as well.”

“Jacob?” Franco hesitated. He doubled the tongue of his belt around his wrist and let the buckle dangle. “And, exactly how is that?”

“Olympia is a small town. On occasion we’ve done business. Your master has, shall we say, esoteric interests. As I am a man of esoteric talents, it’s a match made in… well, somewhere.”

“Carol says you’re a washed up magician. Nice posters. You do anyplace famous? Vegas? The Paramount? Nah; you aren’t any David Copperfield. You were a two bit showman. A hack.” Franco itched to smack him in the mouth; should have done it already. The old man’s contempt, his sneer, was disquieting and stayed Franco’s hand for the moment as he reevaluated his

surroundings, trying to detect the real source of his unease. “Your hands are gone, so now you hustle dumb broads for whatever’s in their purses. I get you, Phil.”

“Magician? *Magician*? I’m a practitioner of the black arts. Seventh among the Salamanca Seven. You understand what I mean when I speak of the black arts, don’t you boy? Since you refuse to leave me in peace, would you care for a drink? Too late now, anyway. I have one every afternoon. The doctor says it’s good for my heart.” Mr. Wary went to a cabinet and took down a crystal decanter and a pair of copitas. He poured two generous glasses of sherry and handed one to Franco. Mr. Wary sat in an armchair. He clicked his nails on the glass and the cat emerged from hiding and sprang into his lap. “Magician? Feh, I’m a sorcerer, a warlock.”

“A warlock, huh?” Franco remained standing. He tasted the sherry, then drained his copita and tossed it against the wall. The small crash and tinkle of broken glass temporarily satisfied his need to inflict pain upon his host. “There’s no fucking such thing, my friend.”

“That was a valuable glass. I acquired the set in Florence. It survived the Second World War.” Mr. Wary’s eyelids fluttered and he smiled with the corner of his mouth. “Yes, I practice mesmerism. Yes, I pulled rabbits from hats and pretended to saw nubile women in half. I am conversant in many things, sleight of hand being among these. Camouflage, boy. And amusement. One meets fascinating people in that line. However, my bread and butter, my life’s work, lies in peeling back the layers of occult mysteries. I was preparing your delectable girlfriend for myself. Ripening and fattening her on the ineffable wonder of the dark. Upon further reflection, I’ve decided to let you have her.”

“What the fuck are you on, man?” Franco imagined poor Carol blithely acquiescing to Mr. Wary’s charms—Franco recognized a predator when he met one. Doubtless the old man with his eccentric garb and quaint accent could pour on the charm. And dear God, what did the creepy bastard do to her when she was incapacitated on that decaying couch? “You sonofabitch. You crazy, fucked up sonofabitch.” He whipped the belt buckle across Mr. Wary’s face. “You’re not going to see her again. She calls you, don’t answer. She knocks on your door, you don’t answer. She tries to talk to you in the hall, you go the other way.” Franco punctuated each directive with a

slap of his belt buckle while the man sat there, absorbing the abuse. It wasn't until the fourth or fifth swipe that he realized his victim was grinning.

Mr. Wary caught the belt and jerked Franco to his knees and grabbed him by the hair. "You insect. You creeping, insignificant vermin." He stood, dragging Franco upright so they were nose to nose. "Do you wish to witness my work with your precious, idiotic paramour? Such unhappiness awaits you."

Franco was calm even in his terror. He pretended to struggle against Mr. Wary's iron grip before slamming his knuckles against the man's windpipe. He'd once killed a fellow with that blow on the mean streets of Harlem. His fingers broke with a snap and he grunted in shock. Mr. Wary shook him as a dog shakes a rat in its jaws. Franco's vision went out of focus even as he slashed the edge of his left hand against the bridge of Mr. Wary's nose, and yelped because it was like striking concrete.

"That's quite enough," Mr. Wary said and looped the belt around Franco's neck and drew it snug. Franco went blind. His muscles stiffened and when Mr. Wary released him, he toppled sideways and his head bounced off the carpet.

4

Mr. Wary handcuffed Franco in a closet and strung him up on tiptoes by means of keeping the belt around his neck and the other end secured to a rusty hook dangling from a chain. Mr. Wary left the door partially ajar. He suggested that Franco remain mum or else matters would go poorly for him, and worse for Carol, who was soon to arrive for her weekly appointment.

The closet was narrow and stuffed with coats and mothballed suits, but roofless—the space above rose vertically into blackness like a mineshaft. While Franco struggled to avoid hanging himself, he had ample opportunity to puzzle over how this closet could possess such a dimension. Occasionally, reddish light pulsed from the darkness and Franco relived his recent nightmare.

Afternoon bled into red evening and the stars emerged in the sliver of sky through the window behind the couch. Franco was in a state of partial

delirium when Carol knocked on the door. Mr. Wary smoothed his shaggy hair and quickly donned a smoking jacket. Carol came in, severe and rushed as usual. He took her coat and fixed drinks and Franco slowly strangled, his view curtailed by the angle of the closet door.

Franco only heard and saw fragments of the next half hour, preoccupied as he was with basic survival. He fell unconscious for brief moments, revived by the pressure at his throat, the searing in his lungs. He contemplated murder. A few feet away his lover and the magician finished their drinks. Mr. Wary told her to make herself comfortable while he put on a recording of scratchy woodwind music. He drew the curtain and clicked on a lamp. He cleared his throat and began to speak in a low, sonorous tone. Carol mumbled, obviously responding to his words.

In due course, Mr. Wary shut off the record player and the apartment fell quiet but for Carol's breathing. He said, "Come, my dear. Come with me," and took Carol's hand and led her, as if she were sleepwalking, to a blank span of the wall. Mr. Wary brushed aside a strip of brittle paper and revealed what Franco took to be a dark water stain, until Carol pressed her eye against it and he realized the stain was actually a peephole. A peephole to where, though? That particular wall didn't abut another apartment—it was an outer wall overlooking the rear square and beyond the square, a ravine.

Carol shuddered and her arms hung slack. Mr. Wary stroked her hair. He muttered in her ear and turned slightly to grin at Franco. A few minutes later, he took her shoulders and gently guided her away from the wall. They exchanged inaudible murmurs. Carol wrote him a check, and seeming to secure her faculties, gathered her coat and bade Mr. Wary a brisk farewell on her way out.

"Your turn," he said upon turning his attention to Franco. He unclasped the belt and led him to the wall, its peeling flap of ancient paper. The peephole oozed a red glow. "All this flesh is but a projection. We are the dream of something greater and more dreadful than you could imagine. To gaze into the abyss is to recognize the dreamer and in recognition, to wake. Not all at once. Soon, however." He inexorably forced Franco's eye against the hole and its awful radiance.

Franco came to, slumped on the coach. Mr. Wary smoked a cigarette and watched him intently. The liquid noises of his own heart, the thump of his pulse, were too loud and he clutched his temples. He recalled a glimpse of Carol's face as dredged from nightmarish limbo. The shape of it, its atavistic lust and ravenous fury terrified him even as a tattered memory. Immense as some forsaken monument, and its teeth—He retched on his shoes.

"It'll pass," Mr. Wary said. The phone, a black rotary, rang. He answered, then listened for several moments. He extended it to Franco. "For you."

Franco accepted the phone and held it awkwardly with his good hand. Across a vast distance, Jacob Wilson said, "Franco? Sorry man, but you're done. I'll have my accountant cut you a check. Kiss-kiss." Across a vast distance, a continent and the Atlantic Ocean, Jacob Wilson hung up.

Mr. Wary took the phone from Franco. "A shame about your job. Nonetheless, I'm sure a man of your ability will land on his feet." He helped Franco rise and propelled him to the door. "Off you go. Sweets to the sweet."

Franco shuffled down the badly lighted hall. A vortex of fire roared in the center of his mind. He stepped into the stairwell. There were no stairs, only a black chasm, and he plummeted, shrieking, tumbling.

"Holy shit! Wake up, dude!" Carol shook his arm. They were in her crummy bed in her crummy apartment. The dark pressed against the window. "You okay? You okay?"

He opened and closed his mouth, biting back more screams. She turned on the bedside lamp and bloody light flooded his vision. He said, "I'm… okay." Tears of pain streamed down his cheeks.

"It's three in the fucking morning. I didn't hear you come in. Why the hell are you still dressed?" She unknotted his tie, began to unbutton his shirt. "Wow, you're sweaty. Sure you're okay? Damn—you drunk, or what?"

"I wish. Got anything?" He wiped his eyes. The lamp had now emitted its normal, butter-yellow light.

"Some Stoli in the freezer." She went into the kitchen and fixed him a tall glass of vodka. He guzzled it like water and she laughed and grabbed the

mostly empty glass from his good hand. “Whoa, Trigger. You’re starting to worry me.” She gasped, finally noticing the lumped and swollen wreck of his right hand. “Oh my God. You’ve been fighting!”

He felt better. His heart settled down. He took off his pants and fell on the bed. “Nothing to worry about. I had a few too many at the bar. Came here and crashed, I guess. Sorry to wake you.”

“Actually, I’m glad you did.”

“Why is that?” His eyelids were heavy and the warmth of the booze was doing its magic.

“You won’t believe the nightmare I was having. I was walking around in a city. Spain or Italy. One of those places where the streets are narrow and the buildings are like something from a medieval film. I could see through people’s skin. X-ray vision. There’s another thing. If I squinted just right, there were these… sort of bloody tendrils hooked to their skulls, their shoulders, and whatnot. The tendrils disappeared into creepy holes in the air hanging above them. The fucking tentacles squirmed, like they were alive.”

He’d gone cold. The pleasant alcohol rush congealed in the pit of his stomach. The tendrils, the holes of oozing darkness—he pictured them clearly as if he’d seen them prior to Carol’s revelation.

She said, “Right before you woke me with all that racket, there was an eclipse. The moon covered the sun. A perfect black disc with fire around the edges. Fucking awesome. Then, there was this sound. Can’t describe it. Sort of a vibration. All the people standing in the square flew up to ward the eclipse. The tendrils dragged them away. It was like the Rapture, Frankie. Except, nobody was very happy. They screamed like motherfuckers until they were specks. Wham! Here you were. The screams must’ve been yours.”

“I rolled over onto my fingers. Hurt like hell.”

“Wanna go to the clinic? Looks bad.”

“In the morning.”

“Fine, tough guy.”

Franco tucked his broken hand close to his face. He lay still, listening for the telltale vibration of doom to pass through his bones.

5

Carol was driving the car into Olympia's outlying farmland. The day was blue and shiny. A girlfriend had given Carol a picnic set for her birthday—a wicker basket, insulated pack, checkered cloth, thermos, and parasol. Her sunglasses disguised her expression. She always wore them.

Franco hadn't shaved in four days. He'd worn the same suit for as long. The majority of those days were spent downtown, hunched over an ever mounting collection of shot glasses at The Brotherhood Tavern. His right hand was splinted and wrapped in thick, bulky bandages. His fingers throbbed and he mixed plenty of painkillers with the booze to dull the edge while he plotted a thousand different ways to kill his nemesis, Mr. Wary. Evenings were another matter—those dim, unvarnished hours between 2 a.m. that found him alone in his Spartan bedroom, sweating and hallucinating, assailed by a procession of disjointed images, unified only in their dreadfulness, their atmosphere of alien terror.

He'd dreamed of her again last night, seen her naked and transfixed in the grand lobby of The Broadsword that belonged to another world, witnessed her lift as if upon wires toward the domed ceiling, and into shadow. Blood misted from the heights and spackled Franco until it soaked his hair and ran in rivulets down his arms and chest, until it made a puddle between his toes. He'd awakened, his cock stiff against his belly and masturbated, and after, sank again into nightmare. He was in Mr. Wary's apartment, although everything was different—an ebony clock and shelves of strange tomes, and Wary himself, towered over Franco. The old man was garbed in a flowing black robe. A necklace of human skulls jangled against his chest. Mr. Wary had grown so large he could've swallowed Franco, bones and all. He was a prehistoric beast that had, over eons, assumed the flesh and countenance of Man.

"You worship the Devil," Franco said.

"The Lord of Flies is only one. There are others, greater and more powerful than he. Presences that command his own obedience. You've seen them. I showed you."

“I don’t remember. I want to go back.” A hole opened in the wall, rapidly grew from pinhole to portal and it spun with black and red fires. At its heart, a humanoid form beckoned. And when he surfaced from this dream into the hot, sticky darkness of Carol’s bedroom, he’d discovered her standing before her closet, bathed in the red glow. She cupped her breasts, head thrown back in exultance, sunglasses distorting her features, giving her the eyes of a strange insect. The door had slammed shut even as he cried out, and his voice was lost, a receding echo in a stygian tomb.

Now they were driving. Now they were parked atop a knoll and eating sandwiches and drinking wine in the shade of a large, flowering tree. A wild pasture spread itself around the knoll and cattle gathered in small knots and grazed on the lush tufted grass. The distant edge of the pasture was marked by a sculpture of a bull fashioned from sheets of iron. The highway sounds were faint and overcome by the sigh of the leaves, the dim crooning of some forgotten star on Carol’s AM radio.

Franco hadn’t told her of his apocalyptic visit to Mr. Wary, nor of his resultant termination from Jacob Wilson’s security attachment. The job wasn’t a pressing concern; he’d saved enough to live comfortably for a while. Prior to this most recent stint, he’d guarded an A-list actor in Malibu, and before that, a series of corporate executives, all of whom had paid well. However, he *was* afraid to speak of Wary, wouldn’t know where to begin in any event.

He lay his head in her lap and she massaged his temples he wondered about this radical change in her personality. He’d not known her to savor a tranquil pastoral setting, nor repose for any duration without compulsively checking her cell phone or chain smoking cigarettes. Her calm was eerie. As for himself, one place to get drunk off his ass was the same as another. The wine ran dry, so he uncapped his hip flask of vodka and carried on. Cumulus clouds piled up, edges golden in the midday sun. He noted some were dark at the center, black with cavities, black with the rot of worms at the core. His eyes watered and he slipped on a pair of wraparound shades and instantly felt better.

“Mr. Wary and I are through,” she said.

“Oh? Why is that?” Had the crazy bastard mentioned his confrontation with Franco? Surely not. Yet, who could predict the actions of someone as bizarre as Mr. Wary?

She stuck a cigarette in her mouth and lighted up. “I’m cured.”

“Wonderful.”

“My nightmares are getting worse, though. I’ve dreamt the same thing every night this week. There’s a cavern, or an underground basement, hard to say, and something is chasing me. It’s dark and I don’t have shoes. I run through the darkness toward a wedge of light, far off at first. It’s an arch and red light is coming through it, from another chamber. I think. Nothing’s clear. I’m too scared to look over my shoulder, but I know whatever’s after me has gained. I can feel its presence, like a gigantic shadow bearing down, and just as I cross the threshold, I’m snatched into the air.”

“The tentacles?”

“Nope, bigger. Like a hand. A very, very large hand.”

“Maybe you should see a real doctor.”

“I’ve got four pill prescriptions already.”

“There’s probably a more holistic method to dealing with dreams.”

“Ha! Like hypnotherapy?”

“Sarcasm isn’t pretty.” Franco sipped vodka. He closed his eyes as a cloud darkened the sun and the breeze cooled. He shivered. Time passed, glimpsed through the shadows that pressed against the thin shell of his eyelids.

Branches crackled and the earth shifted. He blinked and beheld a blood red sky and a looming presence, a distorted silhouette of a giant. Branches groaned and leaves and twigs showered him, roots tore free of the earth and grass, and he rolled away and assumed a crouch, bewildered at the sight of this gargantuan being uprooting the tree. He shouted Carol’s name, but she was nowhere, and he ran for the car parked on the edge of the country road. Behind him, the figure bellowed and there came a crunching sound, the sound of splintering wood. A dirt clod thumped into his back.

Carol was already in the car, driver seat tilted back. She slept with her mouth slightly open. The doors were locked. Franco smashed the passenger

window with his elbow and popped the lock. Carol's arms flapped and she covered her face until Franco shook her and she gradually became rational and focused upon him. Her glasses had fallen off during the excitement and he was shocked at how her pupils had deformed into twin nebulas that reflected the red glow of the sky.

"Drive! We gotta get the hell out of here."

She stared at him, uncomprehending, and when he glanced back, the monstrous figure had vanished. However, the tree lay on its side. She said, "What happened?" Then, spying the ruined tree, "We could've been killed!"

He clutched his elbow and stared wordlessly as the red clouds rolled away to the horizon and the blue sky returned.

"You're bleeding," she said.

He looked at his arm. He was bleeding, all right.

6

The doctor was the same guy who'd splinted his fingers. He gave him a few stitches, a prescription for antibiotics and another for more pain pills. He checked Franco's eyes with a penlight and asked if he'd had any problems with them, and Franco admitted his frequent headaches. The doctor wore a perplexed expression as he said something about Coloboma, then muttering that Coloboma wasn't possible. The doctor insisted on referring him to an eye specialist. Franco cut him off mid sentence with a curt goodbye. He put on his sunglasses and retreated to the parking lot where Carol waited.

She dropped him at his building and offered to come up and keep him company a while. He smiled weakly and said he wasn't in any shape to entertain. She drove off into the night. He turned the lights off, undressed, and lay on his bed with the air conditioning going full power. His breath drifted like smoke. He dialed Mr. Wary's number and waited. He let it ring until an automated message from the phone company interrupted and told him to please try again later.

The closet door creaked. The foot of the bed sagged under a considerable weight. Mr. Wary said, "I thought we had an understanding."

“What’s happening to me?” Franco stared at the nothingness between him and the ceiling. He dared not look at his visitor. When Mr. Wary didn’t answer, Franco said, “Why do you live in a shit hole? Why not a mansion, a yacht? Why aren’t you a potentate somewhere?”

“This is what you’ve done with your dwindling supply of earthly moments? I’m flattered. Not what one expects from the brute castes.”

“My dwindling supply…? You’re going to kill me. Eat my heart, or something.”

Mr. Wary chuckled. “I’d certainly eat your heart because I suspect your brain lacks nutrients. I’ve no designs on you, boy. Consider me an interested observer; no more, no less. As for my humble abode… I’ve lived in sea shanties and mud huts. I’ve lived in caves, and might again when the world ends one day soon.”

“So much for the simple life of dodging bullets and breaking people’s legs.”

“You realize these aren’t dreams? There is no such thing. These are visions. The membrane parts for you in slumber, absorbs you into the reality of the corona that limns the Dark. Goodbye. Don’t call on me again, if you please.” Mr. Wary’s weight lifted from the bed and the faint rustle of clothes hangers marked his departure from the room.

Franco shook, then slept. In his dreams that were not dreams he was eaten alive, over and over and over…

7

Franco collapsed in a stupor for the better part of three days. On the fourth evening, as the sun dripped away, the fugue released him and he finally stirred from his rank sheets. The moon rose yellow as hell and eclipsed a third of the sky.

The sensation was of waking from a dream into a dream.

He loaded his small, nickel plated automatic and tucked it in his waistband. He drove over to The Broadsword and parked on the street three blocks away. The brief walk in the luminous dark crystallized his thoughts, honed his purpose, if not his plan. No one else moved, no other cars. A light shone

here and there, on the street, in a building. Somehow this only served to accentuate the otherworldliness of his surroundings, and heightened his sense of isolation and dread.

Carol's apartment was unlocked, the power off. She sat in the window, knees to chin, hair loose. Moonlight seeped around her silhouette. "There you are. Something is happening."

Franco stood near her. He felt overheated and weak.

"Your arm's gone green," she said. "It stinks."

He'd forgotten about the wound, the antibiotics. His jacket stuck to the dressing and tried to separate when he let his arm swing at his side. "Oh, I've got a fever. I wondered why I felt so bad."

"You just noticed?" She sounded distant, distracted. "The moon is different tonight. Closer. I can feel it trying to drag the blood from my skin."

"Yeah."

"I sleep around the clock. Except it's more like I don't really sleep. More like being stoned. I dream about holes. Opening and closing. And caves and dollhouses."

"Dollhouses?"

"Kinda. You know those replica cities architects make? Models? I dream I'm walking through model cities, except these are bigger. The tallest buildings are maybe a foot taller than me. I look in the windows and doll people scream and run off."

"If that's the worst, you're doing all right."

"No, it gets worse. I don't want to talk about that. I've seen things that scared the living shit outta me. I'm losing it. The tendrils; I've seen them for real, while I'm awake." She rested her head against the glass.

Franco gripped the pistol in his pocket. A tremor passed through the walls and floor. Bits of plaster dust trickled from the ceiling. Something happened to the stars, although Carol's shoulder mostly blocked his view. The yellow illumination of the moon dimmed to red.

"We're going into the dark," Carol said. She'd cast aside the sunglasses. Her face was pale and indistinct.

He walked into the kitchenette and drank a glass of tap water. He removed the gun from his pocket and racked the slide. An object thumped in the other room. When he returned she was gone and the front door hung ajar. The hallway stretched emptily, except for the red glow of the elevator at the far end awaiting him with its open mouth. The stairwell entrance was bricked over. Franco considered the gun. He boarded the elevator and pressed the button and descended.

Everything happened as it had happened in his serial nightmares. She was there in the lobby, gazing toward the vaulted ceiling, and he was too late. A wrinkled hand the size and length of a compact car snatched her up by the fleshy strands as a puppeteer might retrieve a fallen marionette and then blood was everywhere. Franco froze in place, his mind splintering as he registered the tendrils that snaked from his own shoulders and rose into darkness.

An impossibly tall figure lurched from the shadow of the ornate support column. A demonic caricature of an old man, his wizened head nearly scraping the domed ceiling, hunched toward Franco, skinny fingers reaching for him, lips twisting in anticipation. Franco recalled the de Goya painting of the titan Saturn who stuffed a man into his frightful maw and chewed with wide-eyed relish. He fell back, raising his arms in a feeble gesture of defense. The giant took the fistful of Franco's strings, the erstwhile ethereal cords of his soul, and yanked him from his feet; grasped and lifted him and Franco had a long, agonizing moment to recognize his own face mirrored by the primordial aspect of the giant.

Even in pieces, eternally disgorging his innards and fluids, he remained cognizant of his agonies. He tumbled through endless darkness, his shrieks flickering in his wake.

8

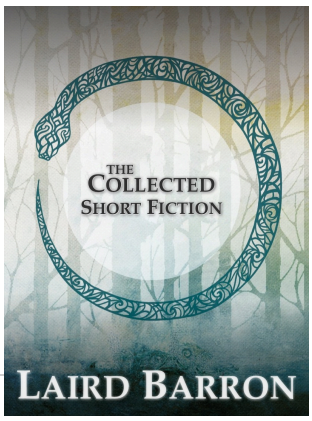
He roused from a joyous dream of feasting, of drinking blood and sucking warm marrow from the bone. His sons and daughters swarmed like ants upon the surface of the Earth, ripe in their terror, delectable in their anguish. He swept them into his mouth and their insides ran in black streams between his lips and matted his beard. This sweet dream rapidly slipped

away as he stretched and assessed his surroundings. He shambled forth from the great cavern in the mountain that had been his home for so long.

Moonlight illuminated the ruined plaza of the city on the mountainside. He did not recognize the configuration of the stars and this frightened and exhilarated him. During his eons' sleep, trees had burst through cracks in paving stones. He squatted to sniff the leaves, to tear them with his old man's snaggle teeth, and relish the taste of bitter sap. His lover approached, as naked and ancient as himself, and laid her hand upon his shoulder. They embraced in silent communion as the sun ate through the moon and bathed the city in its hideous blood-red glare.

The couple's shadows stretched long and dark over the all tiny houses and all the tiny works of men.

The Beatification of Custer Poe



This version taken from *Shades of Blue and Gray*, 2013

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Mordecai Jefferson tried to kill me yesterday. Fifty years gone by and he'd nursed that grudge like a miser covets his gold.

Spring is far away.

Spring in Alaska is a time of thawin' mud and bitter green saplings and soon enough salmon ladderin' their way up the falls. The big snows draw back and reveal the carnage of winter: bones, white and worn, embedded in muck; skulls and ribcages and thighbones of them critters what breathed their last when nights was killin' cold and the Northern Lights danced the cruel red dance of a lowerin' scythe.

Cold is always and ever the watchword in this place, even when summer sun cooks hot enough to boil pitch and the mosquitoes swarm in their black millions. For the cold is present beneath the green and blue veneer. Cold is the point of a skewer fixed to stab.

Nights grow long in late September. Bull moose get to whackin' the hell out of one another as ruttin' season begins. Leaves fall outta the trees after the first stiff blow. Stars wink through a rime of warped glass. Ice creeps down from the outer darkness and spreads a caul across the summits and glaciated valleys, cracks apart the planed slats of my shack. Shouts and gunshots, the chuckles of ravens on the wing, carry for miles, or not at all. The shadow of every cliff-side is the mouth of a tomb.

My marker, if'n I die where anyone can find me, will read: *Here Lies Custer Poe, Ramblin' Man at Rest.* But I reckon I won't get no gravestone. The wilderness will swallow me and spit out my guns and knives to rust back into the dirt.

Another man might've changed his name after what I done in the war. Pappy surely did and he weren't even no soldier nor assassin. Rumor has it, the ol' man goes by Ferris or some-such nonsense. Dunno whether to laugh or spit. Hell with him. I take a cussed pride in this here handle, its provenance. My kin sailed over from Europe in 1809 and their children eventually homesteaded a valley in the Ozarks Mountains. I come along around 1842, eldest among a squallin' and brawlin' clutch of fourteen brothers and sisters. We Poes trapped and hunted and brewed moonshine and was known far and wide as a mighty cantankerous clan that held onto a grudge like grim death. Four of my brothers were rubbed out in saloon fights and blood feuds. Two more died takin' on the blue-bellies. Mama gave up the ghost after droppin' the last of the litter and straight away Pappy got himself hitched to a sweet filly from Nashville. They sold the homestead and run off to Texas. Ain't heard a peep from him since.

I high-tailed it from my valley home when I was sixteen. Me and Pappy were at each other's throats and if it'd gone on, one of us woulda got himself planted in the back forty. So I lit out for greener pastures with nothin' but a sack of vittles, a muzzle-loader my grandpa give me for my eleventh birthday, and my coon dog, Thule. Been a ramblin' man ever since.

Speakin' of handles, folks in town got their own names for me—Ol' Man of the Mountain; Ol' Man Custer; Whitebeard; Creepy Pete; and White Fox… those last monikers stuck on account of my God-given talent to sneak through the woods on my trappin' rounds like a Comanche and the fact I'm old as the dust on the hills. There's codgers at the Wolftooth Saloon who'll swear I'm so sly that I can creep upon a perched grouse and sprinkle salt on its tail. Ain't sayin' they're wrong, either. Dress me in buckskins and mukluks and there ain't too many critters that'll hear me before I'm on 'em with gun, knife, or stranglin' wire. I do surely enjoy the feel of the wire in my mitts. Better than the bone handle of a knife, even. Oh, yes indeedy.

But I'm getting' off the trail.

A reporter traveled from Seattle to visit me last autumn of 1915, right before the first hard freeze. Imagine that! Tracked me all the way from the Ozarks where I was born to this bolt hole in the Alaskan wilderness a few miles north of McCafferty Landing on the mighty Kuskokwim. Wet behind the ears lad named Johnston. I shoulda took it for an omen of ill. On the

heels of that palaver the animals began whisperin’ to me and the long shadows made peculiar shapes and moved against their own nature. There are words that shouldn’t be uttered lest a man is ready to call down the attention of powerful forces.

See, the interview became my confession. Don’t matter none that nobody will ever read it in any damned yellow rag. The Maker knows what lies in the heart of a man—and so does the Devil. Them words of mine stirred up revenants. Even so, it felt right liberatin’ to come clean here in the twilight of my mortal span.

Wasn’t me that truly interested Johnston. Nah, he was writin’ an essay about infamous figgers of the war. Corrupt officers, mutineers, criminals and such. He aimed to make his fortune by bringin’ this rogues’ gallery to the modern public. I’d known the man he was after. Known the man, and what’s more, laid him low. And so for the first time in almost fifty years I was asked the fateful question. Bein’ an honest sort, I answered true.

Here’s what I told Johnston as we tucked into plates of lumpy dick and molasses while the wind knocked in the chimney:

Yeah, it was me who assassinated Mordecai Jefferson at the tail end of the War of Northern Aggression. Was the captain really a bad man? A murderer and a horse thief? Sure, I reckoned so. A rapist and a drunk? Oh, indeedy. And had the captain ordered the slaughter of farmers and the wanton sacking of their homes? Was it also true he killed his own men over petty grievances? All true, said I. Mordecai didn’t require no grievance to do dirt to his comrades. He’d shoot a fellow through the gizzard just because the sky was blue and the wind fell outta the west. Everybody who knows anythin’ about the war knows that Mordecai Jefferson collected scalps from the battlefield. He often skinned his enemies, at least the ones who’d made him mad. The captain was a student of history, especially if it had to do with warfare. He was partial to a long dead Scotsman named William Wallace who’d done the same. Mordecai’s standard was blazoned upon the flesh stripped from a platoon of Blue Belly regulars. His belt came from the hide of a Northern Colonel he’d captured in a burned out farmhouse. The officer come forth under the white flag and Mordecai smiled and slashed off his head with a cavalry saber. Kept that molderin’ skull as a paperweight on his camp desk.

All that said, my assassinatin' him was nothin' personal. The job sorta fell into my lap. Can't say who originally ordered the deed done—a faro dealer in Bridgeton took me aside and made the proposition, flashed a secret writ with the Confederate seal affixed neat as you please. The faro dealer whispered that the command came from on high. He also whispered that now I knew too much to refuse. So I didn't refuse. Anyway, for two hundred dollars and a bottle of Kentucky bourbon you could get me to set fire to my own ass, much less ventilate an irascible coot like Mord.

Tell you this, though: for the remainder of our bivouac in town, the awerdenty, vittles, and women were my treat. Mord wanted for nothin'. We whooped it up, boy. I sent my pardner off in grandiose style.

Upon week's end, Mordecai and I set to marchin' homeward alongside a wagon train. Long, wearyin' slog after all the commotion and clamor of battle. Comin' on to dusk our posse was fixin' to portage Gillis Crick. Never would be a better opportunity for murder, or so I reckoned. I waited until he turned to tether his big piebald in the rushes. Now, I had to be extra cautious on account Mordecai's reflexes were like a cougar's and he was mighty slick with a shootin' iron. Lined up my trusty Colt with the back of his skull and squeezed the trigger. A lick of flame shot from his hair and he dropped, dead as dirt. The piebald spooked and tore out of there. Galloped for three miles and we played Hob tryin' to catch him. A feller in Madison give me a Sharps 1851 rifle for that horse.

I didn't roll Mordecai over, or nothin'. Was a bad business puttin' down the poor ol' cuss; made me sick to my soul and I turned and walked away while the smoke still rose from his corpse. I heard tell from the drovers who packed him into a box that he didn't have no face left on account of the slug blowing it off, just a black and bloody hole. Didn't need the drovers to pass the news. I see that god-awful wound all the time, peepin' at me from the shadows. Blamed thing gives me the shivers. But Doc Green says it ain't unusual for a man my age to have a bit of water on the brain, ain't unusual for a man my age to see Death sneakin' along his backtrail.

Anyway. That was the end of the line for me. I got cashiered a few weeks later and sat out the final battles in one bucket of blood dancehall or another. Word got around that I'd smoked Mordecai and I decided it best to make myself scarce.

Used the last of my iron men for ship passage. I lit out for Alaska and never returned to the civilized world. Traveled all around this here northern territory for a passel of years. Haines and Skagway, Poorman and Ruby on the bitter Yukon, Kotzebue and Nome. Oh, Lord, Nome ain't no place for an honest man. The women are hard, the whiskey harder, and in the summertime a cold wind blows from the sea and whips the dust along the flats past the seawall. Winters are mean enough to put icicles on your soul. I got shut of Nome quick as I could, lemme tell you.

I been a fisherman, trapper, placer miner, and sometime chief cook and bottle washer at line camps. I can hunt and skin and always seem to know the direction of true north whether the sun or the stars are in their heaven. I get by. Easy to get by when your needs are small and space is so wide. Some go mad here in the land of the midnight sun. Endless light and bugs all summer; eternal darkness of the pit come winter. It's the kind of place a man slips away to when he wants to vanish. The kind of place even God Almighty might forget to look. Maybe that's why nobody come after me to exact vengeance on Mordecai's behalf. Too damned much trouble. I lived real quiet and folks in this neck of the woods don't give a tin shit about what happened to grampa or grand-uncle Joe in Antietam or any of them other fields of slaughter. Here, I'm just one of many shiftless, wise-crackin' whitebeards scrabblin' in the hills.

Wasn't much else to tell my reporter chum. Johnston seemed a mite disappointed that my demeanor wasn't more fearsome, but he wrote it all down in his little book.

Like so many cheechakos who swagger north, the kid was a tadpole in a man's wilderness. Shaved his face smooth as a sow's ass. Bright-eyed and red of cheek, the rotgut hit him hard. Takes almost half a bottle to knock me sideways, but that reporter lad was skunk drunk after a couple of snorts. In hindsight, us drinkin' together probably made for a tragic mistake. Kid was in such an all-fired hurry to get back to civilization, he took down my testament and skedaddled before dawn lit up the mountains. Still soused, I reckon. The gods were against him, too. Like some kind a cursed magic, the first snowflakes blew in across the range that very mornin'. Snowed so damned hard I couldn't see the woodshed from the porch. Got trapped indoors for the better part of a fortnight.

The boy never was seen again. Missed the boat to Seattle. Constable Tom figgered he met with misadventure along the way from my shack to town. Them caribou trails are treacherous, mighty treacherous. What with the storm and the ice, well… his fate seemed clear. The kid took a tumble or got lost and froze. Either way, he was surely raven meat.

Maybe, maybe.

For my part, I ain't so sure Johnston slipped and fell into a crevasse nor wandered afield and ended his days in the manner of a moose calf et by wolves. There's bad men prowlin' these hills. Claim jumpers and assorted riffraff. And talkin' bears, evidently. Could be one a' them done for him. In any event, lotta folks go missing in these parts.

Sad; I kinda liked him even if he was a cheechako.

Weeks passed. It just kept gettin' colder and nastier. We was in for a winter the likes I ain't seen in a coon's age. Supplies was runnin' a mite low, so I strapped on my snowshoes and commenced the hike into McCafferty Landing.

Got me a jug of awerdenty at Jeb Parson's dry goods store. Lugged it with the flour, coffee, and sundries back to my shack over the mountain on Slawson River. There's gold in that there river. It's a shallow crick compared to the Kuskokwim, but it's fast and just a few years ago people set to cuttin' each others' throats each spring when the passes opened and the cheechako panners came a runnin' from the lower Forty-Eight. Every summer was a blood and thunder, rip-roarin' claim jumpin' summer. I eagerly awaited the party. Oh, yes indeedy. Course, it's quieted down a mite.

I made it back to my shack, kindled a fire and settled in for a spell. Built this shack in 1904. She's drafty. She leaks. Her floorboards hang over a cliff that plunges clear down to rocks and the gnashin' teeth of the river. Marten and mice rustle in the eaves. A rude and homely abode, but she's my castle.

So, there I was, shucked outta my duds and lyin' naked as a newborn but for a pair of holey, grimy socks, and sippin' off the neck of the jug and feelin' no pain. I've testified how miserable it gets in the north, well this beat all—cold as a witch's tit. I'd stoked the fire in the pot stove and warmed my toes near the flames and stared at the antlers and the smudged

photographs hangin’ from the walls. Didn’t recognize no folks in the pitchers—none were of my kin, nor associates. Kept ’em up there all the same as I didn’t have no pitchers of my own.

Custer.

My eyelids had almost shut. That strange, breathy groan might’ve been the wind in the spruce whisperin’ my name. I knew better. My heart did too. It plumb froze for a couple of ticks and I lay helpless as a baby in my cot. Something heavy moved along the porch and there came a scratchin’ of long nails on wood. The front door creaked open and frigid air rolled into the cabin. I smelled the foulness of wet fur and rotten salmon mixed with the sharp, clean taste of spruce boughs and snow. A shadow fell across the wall.

I turned my head and beheld a bear halfway through the door. A big ol’ brute, its shaggy black hide rimed in frost, bits of ice and snow caught in its clabbered jaws. The fangs was crooked and dark as flint knives. Beady eyes flared red in the fire glow, rolled in the sockets to the whites and back again.

“Oh, shitfire,” I said. My visitor had no business bein’ awake and prowlin’ the hills. It should’ve been snug in a cave and dreamin’ of spring.

The beast swayed in place and growled. That growl sounded a lot like *Custer, I’m here for you, you sonofabitch.* Sounded like it wanted to say more, too. The Colt I brung home from the war was in my fist and I rolled onto my belly and shot the varmint four times (the other two bullets blew holes in the wall) and it slumped, the red light in its eyes coolin’ right quick. Gods, the cabin stank of shit and piss and gun smoke and I nearly chucked my dinner.

Custer, the bear gurgled with its dyin’ breath.

“Fuck you too, Mordecai,” I said. My hand was shakin’ so bad I dropped the pistol. Despite the bitter chill and the flakes of snow twirlin’ about my head, my sight grew dim and I rested my eyes for a while in a whiskey faint.

I woke to three inches of windblown snow swishin’ in the cabin and that damned bear goin’ stiff in the doorway. The shack’s windows are tiny as portholes, so I figgered the only way out was to cut my way through before

the carcass froze solid. I pulled on my britches, rekindled the fire, and gave my skinnin' knife a few licks on the whetstone.

The bear had bit the dust all hunkered down, its massive shoulders wedged in the threshold. I reached as far as I could and let out its guts with a jerk of my Arkansas Toothpick. Blood did surely gush forth and dripped down through the knotty planks and painted the icy cliff face below. Had to work a mite fast. Dark was on the way, and maybe a blizzard. Then it'd be chilly enough to quick freeze hapless me.

I rolled my sleeves and set to yarding the guts into a pile on the floor. The bear's hide twitched and bunched along its shoulder, made a lump the size of my fist, like somethin' was slidin' around underneath. I helped myself to another snort of awerdenty, wiped my mouth, and poked the lump with the point of the knife. The fur flattened, as if whatever hid there had gone deeper inside. A small critter retreating into its burrow of flesh. My heart beat faster.

"Ah, Mordecai. You cagey ol' bastard." I'd heard the injuns in the southwest call men who change their shape skin-walkers. So, what did they call a man whose spirit inhabits corpses and animals and suchlike? Didn't really hold with such superstition as a rule, but Lord take mercy, I'd seen queer things aplenty durin' my time. If my long dead pal's immortal soul had ghosted its way into the body of an animal, that'd just be the latest development in a saga that got queerer by the day.

I gazed down at the growin' mound of guts and for a moment, I was a Roman prophet, lost in their bloody tale.

Half a lifetime ago when I first come to this territory, I rode with a sourdough named Victor Haagen. Scandinavian by way of Canada. Fellow had a hooked nose and hands that could choke a moose. He was a well-digger by trade. Victor gave up diggin' wells for placer minin' and pitched a teepee near Ophir. He taught me a thing or two about survivin' in the northlands. What berries to eat, where the ptarmigan roost, how to roll in the snow after you fall in a crick, the best way to toss an axe. He's the one who learned me how to snare, and for that I'm ever grateful.

Victor seldom spoke. I expect he had kin overseas, or east of the Yukon, maybe a wife and younguns, but as he didn't utter three words on a given

day, the Lord alone knew the truth of it. Once in a while I'd go on a week-long trappin' expedition with him and we'd camp in one of the lean-tos he'd built along the way. We'd swill awerdenty and watch the sparks from the fire dance among the stars. If'n he got plenty soaked, the codger would take a pitcher from his pocket and press it against the breast of his buckskins and weep. I knew better than to try and peek at the pitcher, and sure as hell I wasn't keen to ask what had broken his heart in two. Nah, I liked my teeth where they sat and I kept my peace.

He surprised me once, though. This was after a long night of drinkin' in our customary silence. I'd drifted to sleep and had a dream wherein dead folks, some of whom I'd kilt, rose from their graves and assailed me with ghastly wails and clutchin' hands. I awoke with a groan to Victor starin' at me with a peculiar intent. He got a right mischievous gleam in his rheumy eyes, and he grinned, but more like a wolf grins. He said, "Custer, you cursed, ol' son. Yore demons ridin' you like a hoss."

I asked what he meant by that. Victor shrugged and mumbled somethin' in Yupik (he'd spent a few winters among the tribes). Course, this riled me and I demanded to know what the devil he meant. No use. Victor commenced to pourin' more awerdenty down his throat and pretty quick he collapsed, dead to the world. Frustrated, I took a notion to do the same.

Next mornin' Victor was nowhere to be found. He'd slipped away and left me a few supplies and ashes in the fireplace. Didn't make a damned bit of sense. Maybe the coot had gone round the bend after one too many seasons in the wild.

I only figgered much later that he didn't cotton to me. We weren't nowhere near as friendly as I'd thought, and never had been despite appearances. Nope, he was like a grizzled lobo who'd scented somethin' off about me, and it scared him. Scared him so bad, he pretended we was thick as thieves, smilin' to my face, all the while plannin' mischief. After that fateful night I didn't speak to him again. He stripped his teepee clean and departed the territory. Rafferty, the gent who runs the Wolftooth Saloon, claimed Victor returned to Canada. Jeb Parson told me a lawman had been spotted travelin' from village to village along the Kuskokwim. Parson figgered it to be a US Marshal on Victor's trail for some ol' business. Maybe a murder or two. I didn't peg my pal for no dirty dog bushwhacker and said as much to Parson.

He just shook his head and informed me that rumor had it Victor shot a few folks in British Columbia, stole their vittles and the gold from their teeth. Whatever the case, none a us ever clapped eyes on the ol' boy again, that's certain.

Round about then that I first spied the shade of Mordecai Jefferson.

I'd decided to rest a spell after tyin' one on at the Wolftooth, so I lay me down on the Main Street boardwalk. Earlier that night Bobby Yu (a trapper from North Fork) had punched me in the jaw and I feared it might be broke. 'Twas pissin' rain and dark as a mineshaft but for a feeble glow comin' through the saloon window and the occasional flash of lightnin'. I didn't give a rip. My legs was done and my face had gone numb. Somebody come along and lifted me out a the mud and propped me against the door of Parson's store. I laughed to imagine how I would look in daylight sittin' there all pretty, like one a' them outlaw corpses people stacked along the walkway with signs around their neck.

Well, I happened to open my eyes from a nightmare about bein' scalped by a blue-belly regular and a whipcrack bolt of fire whizzed across the sky and I beheld a figger lurkin' across the way in the alley between Magoon's Feed and what used to be the telegraph office. Good God Almighty, the vision nearly unhinged me: a man in tattered Confederate gray. Faceless. Eyes, nose, mouth all one jagged wound oozin' gore. I knew it for Mordecai just the same. He waved at me.

Yeah, I was drunk and it was dark and thus when the light flashed again and Mord had vanished, I quickly dismissed the incident as a fever dream. The taste of puke lingered in my mouth for days, though.

The ghosts showed themselves a lot more after that. Mostly it'd be a shadow in the corner of my eye, or a suspicious arrangement of bushes, or a mirage when I'd slept too little and drunk too much. Mord's garbled voice would come to me through the walls of my shack as I lay in a stupor. He haunted my dreams and them badlands between sleep and wakin'. Whenever I was weakest, he'd come and whisper his laments.

That was all he could muster though. Just a phantom with a phantom's complaints. After the first shock of his grisly appearance, I never rightly feared him in that puny state. I didn't fear none of them.

You might be puzzled what I mean by “them.”

Mordecai weren’t the first man I murdered. Not by a long shot. He weren’t the last, neither. I got myself a powerful taste for bloodlettin’. How many were there, over the years? God damn me if I can reckon for certain. Too many drunk trappers, miners, and dancehall gals to even count, so I don’t bother. Some of those folks went a real hard way, not painless like my buddy Mordecai. There was stabbin’s and shootin’s that turned out wrong, and one or two who fought and struggled no matter how deep I tightened the stranglin’ wire. Them’s the revenants who come callin’, hungry for vengeance, I expect. Mordecai weren’t nothing special, except bein’ the maddest and the loudest of the bunch.

In some parts of this vast ol’ continent, the natives whisper of the wendigo. Dependin’ upon the particular superstition, wendigo is a demon of the wastes that eats men and it can be bested with fire and steel like any other dumb beast. Other, darker, traditions suppose the wendigo is a shadow that stains the soul. Acts of terrible cruelty or violence make it bold and cause it to spread. Depravity, gluttony, malice, maybe a taste of cannibalism—these make a codger’s heart beat faster and quicken the black sap within.

I’m thinkin’ if the wendigo exists, it’s likely that second thing. My mind wanders, see. I ramble. When I said I built this here shack in ’04, what I meant was, I took possession of it from Calvin Buntline. These pitchers on the wall, those are Buntline’s kin. Cal made the trip from Indiana when word come that they’d seen color along the Kuskokwim. He took me in one miserable night as I wandered the hills searchin’ for a claim to stake. We drunk us a shitpot load of awerdenty and fell to arguin’ over cards. I stuck him with my Barlow knife, watched the red run down his leg, watched his eyes change to glass. Don’t know what possessed me to lean over and press my lips to his as he gasped his last, but I did and breathed it in.

Victor Hagen I did for with a wire snare. Seemed only right as he’d taught me how in the first place.

That reporter, the Johnston kid, him I took apart with a pickaxe, though I don’t rightly recall the details. I only recall how my mouth sealed his at the end, and how the snow melted in his lashes like bits of diamond.

Ain’t a one of my defeated foes seemed capable of enacting their desire to wrap cold dead hands around my throat. Nah, all they do is mope and bluster from the shores of Purgatory. Back when it all began I drank a jot more. Slept sound as a baby. In time the visions faded. Most nights I plumb forgot the whole mess.

Until the bear, that is.

Darkness closed in over the mountain and the snow fell thick as goosedown through the chaparral. I continued to skin the black bear. I peered into its eyes every now and again, lookin’ for a spark of resumed life. A powerful sense of impendin’ doom come over me and I half expected its jaws to snap shut on my arm. Somethin’ stirred within that great, sodden bulk. This wasn’t gas escapin’ from guts, or death twitches. Nossir, nossir. I slid my knife under the ribs, drivin’ inward till I was elbow deep and kept sawin’ until the drippin’ heart come free. For a moment it lay quiet and cool in my hands. Then, by God, it twitched and convulsed, squirtin’ dribs and drabs of blood through its slashed arteries.

Wisps of yeller steam twisted away from that quiverin’ flesh with a teakettle moan. Them vapors moved against the risin’ wind and wove themselves into the apparition of a man. A frail and decrepit manifestation, to be sure. So pallid and thin it seemed about to drift apart at any moment. There floated Mordecai, a smoky void where his expression of wrath shoulda been. He moaned again, in tune with the wind as it rushed over the rocks and through the trees. That mournful keenin’ went on and on. Finally I grew plumb weary of the game. I yawned and gulped him in. His yeller form disappeared down my gullet the way smoke goes sucked up a chimney flue.

I pushed the bear carcass out onto the porch and shut the goddamned door against the storm. Sliced its heart into strips and fried them in a pan. Man, it was sweet and bitter and good. A mite stringy, but not nearly as tough as I’d expected.

Slave Arm

This version taken from *Blood Type*, 2013
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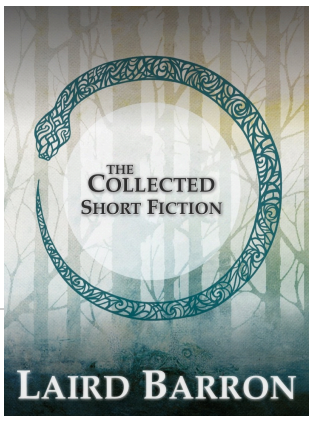


Begin, again.

Don’t begin with a white room, it’s not, it’s a black room. Hothouse humid, oasis in the subarctic night. A glitter ball strobes, synched with the aurora borealis, the background radiation of the stars. Scandalously clad kids slam dance to a metal band, the bass player wears an executioner’s hood, the lead singer has a beard just like the front man for Clutch. Smokes a cheroot, swills whiskey, and breathes fire. Benny Three-Trees and Jasper Hostettler were flown in from Anchorage and Fairbanks to make sure this party’s got its favors. Blotter, X, Jack Daniels, vodka, tequila, blow, crystal, hash, peyote, smack, Black Bombers, Viagra, California Gold, Matanuska Thunderfuck, nitrous. Window glass quivers like jelly in Dixie cup shooters. It’s three a.m. Fuck the police. Your friends are here. Your enemies are here. Everybody you’ve ever slept with is here. Except Jessica. She’s off wandering the earth, righting wrongs. You’ll never see her again. That leaves Tom, Margie, Rod, Bill, Thurman, Shelley, Frank, Lisa, Becka, Tomra, Justin, Everett, Kurt, Mina, Tabby, Klein, Regan, Merrit, Luther, Jackson, Tashondra, Donte, Violet, Simon, Bart, Darcy, Sarah, Clute, Bowie, Pilar, Carol, Eric, Camilla, Brian, Jason, John, Lori, Miller, Parish, Will, Nick, Berrian, Jody, Chandler, Mary, Erin, Clay, Tobias, Judith, Rich, Nelson, Zane, Warren, Bob, Sam, Philip, Castor, Julie, Newhouse, Cole, Esteban, Amy, Tyree, Vernon, Esther, Glenn, Kate, Kathy, Mark, Mark, Jake, Lucy, Ashley, Kyla, River, Arrow, Marsha, Cory, Stephen, Roger, Glory, Grant, Howard, Flynn, Victor, Bubba, Samantha, Custer, Alabama, Truman, Rupert, June, Ruby, Kirsten, Kevin, Lambert, Robard, Dickie, Ralph, Quinn, Hester, Felix, Dusty, Paul, Byron, Kareem, James, Gunther, Abelard, Queenie, Suri, Rochelle, Theodore, Brunhilde, Molly, Cooper, Wanda, Morris, Michelle, Tammy-Lynn, Starling, Hector, Earl, Kellen, Tiberius, Chance, Dakota, Monson, Spencer, Wayne, Lily,

Ramses, Chuck, Portia, Terry, Terri, Trish, Craig, Delaney, Vance, Carmine, Russo, Penny, Ferris, Noah. The last two are a pair again after a few years apart. Sweet. You don't know the rest, the hangers on, freeloaders, strangers. Moving shadows. The happening is happening at the ancestral home of young rotund Zane Tooms himself, poor rich boy, wannabe Satanist, friend to no one no matter how cool his digs may be, and they are indeed cool. A three-story mansion and an unfinished basement. Basement expands deep into the hillside, ancient bear den, crumbled arches, moldering catacombs, bat roosts, portal to Pluto's Ballroom. Downhill, a lovely hillside, a copse of spruce trees, boulders, a field where fireweed grows, farther on lies the bay, ink-black under a tilted moon, cracked. Moms and Pops jetted to Acapulco for the weekend and the mice will riot. Upstairs in the master suite, you've got your cock halfway into that Ukrainian transfer student, the cheerleader, what's-her-name, and she's throwing her blonde head like a mare, impatient. You're thinking ouch, and man, this is a hell of a fancy bed, are these sheets satin, is the demon-face headboard mahogany, and good God what's with the creepy Gothic architecture anyway, and who's that guy walking into the frame? Is it the cheerleader's boyfriend, what's-his-name, captain of the varsity squad, 'cause that would be very bad, you'd want your steel toe boots for an ape with forearms like he's swinging. No, not the jock. Wait, is that *Russo*? Definitely looks like Russo who runs the forklift on the fresh floor of the cannery. Different though, filling the doorway, cropped hair, pale complexion, eye shadow thick enough for a *Star Trek* cameo, original series, features smoothed and stretched plastic masklike, loose dark shirt and too-tight pants tucked into combat boots. Hefts a club, or a mace, a car axle, something out of a medieval manual of slaughter, two and a half feet of steel wrapped in barbed wire, electric tape on the grip, funny the photographic detail your brain records in moments of stress. The girl kisses your neck, she hasn't seen the freak. It's all wrong. Uncanny resemblance notwithstanding, this isn't the Russo you were blazing with on the loading dock just yesterday, not the Russo who's got a thing for the color grader from Caltech, not the Russo who lost his license drag racing on the Parks Highway and needs a lift everywhere, not the one who's built for a run at the middleweight title but wouldn't hurt a fly, the pacifist, conscientious objector, tofu-munching emo rocker. *This* Russo has taken an ice pick to the

brain and become Mr. Flat Affect. He licks his liver lips, and Gene Simmons would shit a brick at the yellow tongue drooped to that pointy chin. Mr. Flat Affect crosses the room in an awkward lunge, the way a toad suddenly decides to jump, and it's so fast your breath stops. You roll off the opposite half of that acre of satin and the club wallops the cheerleader instead of your naked ass. Prior to this moment you've always considered yourself a bit of a tough guy. Lean, mean, scars on your knuckles from a respectable number of barroom brawls, only last fall you socked Tom Gorski in the kisser after one wisecrack too many, dropped him like a bad habit. You're no punk, no wuss, no pantywaist, had your nose busted plenty, lost some teeth in the bargain. You have also come to the realization you aren't Chuck Norris either. The bludgeoning thuds are a message from the universe. You're no shark, you're a feeder fish, aren't you? The interloper whacks her a couple of times, lazy and disinterested. There's blood, a lot of it, all those September hunts when Dad shot the caribou with his .7mm and you slashed the dumb beast's throat and its life gushed out over your Wellies, this is similar. You make your move and fly for the door. You're howling. Demon Russo would catch you, because next to him you're stuck in quicksand, but the club gets snagged in a nest of guts and that second or two is all you need to escape. It's dark and the house is a maze. You've visited twice during daylight when it was just the Tooms family and everybody in polo shirts and golf slacks, sunny dispositions, dinner on the deck with the gob smacking view of Settler's Bay. This is the nightmare version of that scenario, the Bizarro World iteration. Doors are locked and impenetrable. Music rumbles far below and nobody responds to you screaming bloody murder. An accent lamp floats in a golden bubble way down at the end of the hall and you sprint for it, jagged claws of your shadow outstretched in desperation.

Even all these years after the fact, you recall the cheerleader's expression in a smash close-up. Homegirl doesn't know she's dead, keeps blinking at you, confused as she drowns on herself.

Your father dies in a tavern parking lot when you are twenty-two. Your mother goes home to Tennessee, sends postcards now and again, the weather's fine. Little brother joins the Marines, like his old man, earns a Bronze Star, opens a gun store in Texas, shoots a couple of kids who try to rob the joint. The jury decides he's justified. You sleep with a lot of women with the light on, lose your erection whenever you stop to think. There are nightmares. One that recurs has you as a child in your old bedroom, you stand near the dresser and a poster of Buck Rogers. A skinny hand and arm slither from beneath your bed, followed by your father. Except his face is angular and cold with alien emotion. He moves the herky-jerky way a marionette does. He wants your blood, projects that desire into your thoughts without opening his mouth. You always awaken before he gets you. Hell of it is, you don't know whether it's really a dream or a suppressed memory. So, you drink. We won't speak of wife one.

Wife two is Amie. You stole her from Mack the slack, Mack jumped off the bridge into Hurricane Gulch. Oh, Amie, baby, who wouldn't? Brunette, Libra, whip smart, hot as fire. Most importantly, she doesn't give a goddamn how screwed up you are, how wild and strange you are, how damaged, or else she cleverly looks past it to the good points. You have several. Got all your hair, make a decent wage in construction, still cut pretty sharp in a suit. Two of three children tolerate your presence, the dog is also fond. The dog is a German Shepherd you named Chip because of a story that science fiction author Bradley Denton wrote when you were a kid. You and Chip go hunting for ptarmigan every fall, the only good thing you can recall sharing with your dad. Last September you load the guns and drive out to the Little Susitna, follow a game trail away from the Parks Highway, three, maybe four miles where the spruce grow tall and close in, a mossy shadow land. Crack yourself a cool beer, propped against a tree, loyal hound at your feet, the sun a pale reflection against the underside of the canopy. Even sweet wife fades into the ether for a while. Chip looses a stream of piss and whines and then you hear, echoing from not too far away in the arboreal deeps, the weirdest birdcall ever. Laughter of a raven mimicking a man mimicking a hyena. Cackles your name, calls to Chip.

C’mere, doggy! This lone cry becomes a chorus, converging. Shotgun or not, you and the dog run for your lives. That shrieking laughter pursues you nearly back to the car. You break the speed limit gunning for home, Chip cowers on the floorboard, fangs bared as if some horror rides in the back seat. *We’re waiting for you, pal. We know where you live.*

Zane Tooms got on the Tony Robbins bandwagon and dropped sixty pounds, tried to make something of himself, didn’t try all that hard. Heartthrob handsome after the sea change, but fat wasn’t truly the root of his problems. Something dark and rotten was going on in that noggin. Capped teeth and a chiseled physique couldn’t mitigate the filth beaming from his eyes. He lived alone in that mansion on the hill after Mr. and Mrs. died. Spent his nights at the Bohemian cocktail lounge hitting on the young lasses, became known as the Rohypnol Romeo, bought himself an indictment with a suggested sentencing range of twenty-five to life if it stuck. Blew town and disappeared to the bottom of the FBI most-wanted list. Sends you a letter the day before Christmas, first contact after a decade of silence, arrives in a grimy, blood-spotted envelope, sum of the message a Mexico City phone number, initials *ZT*, smudgy fingerprints all over the stationery. You are wary, but intrigued. There’s a twenty-five thousand dollar reward, which you don’t give a shit about, money isn’t a problem for you anymore, you have questions, you have a redaction scribble in the middle of your brain where dreadful memories once clamored for release. You want to talk to fatboy Tooms, want to wring his neck, beg him to put the pieces together. He’s living under an assumed name in a fancy hotel on the outskirts, keeps a whole suite to himself. His transformation impresses, dresses in a linen suit, smokes French cigarettes, seems at ease in his own expat skin, but you recognize him, the real him, instantly. You don’t talk about what he’s done, don’t mention the fact FBI and INTERPOL are on the case, could be staking out the joint at that very moment, recording everything for the blockbuster trial. That’s a foregone conclusion, written in the stars. You’re here for other unfinished business. He pours two glasses of mescal, no lime, no nothing, utters a prayer and downs his, then flashes a revolver and says he asked you here to apologize or to kill you. It depends.

Actually, that's a lie, he's already made up his mind, he wants to chat first, so drink your drink, old friend, and you do. Once everything's cozy, you've chuckled over the hijinks of days of yore, his finger relaxes from the trigger and you ask what the hell man? What happened way back when in the bear den beneath the house? He smiles sadly, professes ignorance, but his eyes belong to a snake and though you ask again, nicely, he refuses to answer truly. He was a child then, he dicked about with childish things, any real diabolism that resulted is purely coincidental. The room spins as you go belly up. They don't call the bastard the Rohypnol Romeo for nothing. In the half-dozen beats until the world goes dark you watch a tremor pass through him, crown to toe, and your subconscious wants to make an impossible connection, suggests he's a finger puppet of some primordial malevolence and it's show time. The flesh of his face snaps upward, much as a bank robber pulls on a nylon mask, except from the wrong direction. Hello to Mr. Flat Affect, your old friend.

Okay, we'll mention wife one, briefly. Her post-coital cigarette didn't package with a *what are you thinking.* Hers was a beady-eyed scowl and a demand to know what your damage was. What had happened to fuck you so thoroughly up, she couldn't begin to fathom. Were you molested as a child? Did Daddy piss in your cornflakes? Did something *awful* transpire to make you so afraid of the dark? You loved her, you desired her happiness with the intensity of a death wish. But you couldn't tell her what was buried in your heart, couldn't articulate the queasy blackness that flooded your mind whenever you tried. If you knew where she'd run off to after your marriage fireballed, you could call her up, tell her about the time you visit Mexico to meet a childhood chum and come to taped hand and foot upon the ledge of a marble tub, IV needle in your femoral artery, half your blood oozing drip by drip through a tube into gallon bags. Classical music plays. There's a muttered conversation that you can't understand, and not because blood loss causes your ears to ring, nor because the voices are muttering in Spanish. It's because whatever language is formed by this combination of glottal stops, clicks and liquid hisses, it isn't human. You manage to peel free of the tape, slick with your fluids as it is, the heat of the room, and slide over

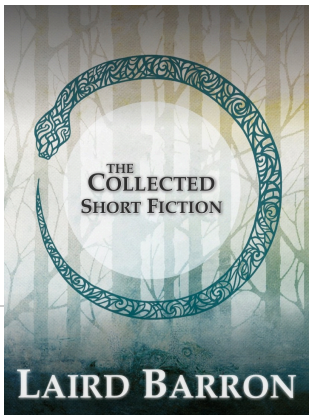
the rim of the tub into a heap. You vomit. That's what happens when blood pressure drops to nil. Keep crawling toward the light, all you can do, coherent thought is water through a dribble glass, it just makes a mess on your shirt. Three of them stand in the parlor with your host. They wear variations on the face of the grave and very nice suits. There's a naked body curled upon a rubber mat. The body is bound in barbed wire and one of the men, Armani suit and snazzy shoes, sips from a red tube inserted at the victim's neck. Everybody pauses to stare at you, including the dead or dying guy, his glassy eyes are wet as you drag yourself past, hand over hand. His eyes reflect your antlike toil across the killing floor. Maybe he's reenacting Horace Greasley's great escape vicariously through you. Maybe he's already there. The front door swings open and uniformed men burst through screaming *Policía*! Their assault rifles start flashing and the room fills with clouds of dust and smoke. You crawl onward, past threshing jackboots and smoldering shell cases. Explosions and screams continue unabated. It goes on and on. Longest movie you've ever been in. Later at the hospital a tall handsome American sits at your bedside. Tubes everywhere, but at least the fluids are going into you this time. The man introduces himself as Agent Justin Steele. He flashes a badge and declares who he works for, although none of it sticks in your consciousness, you're wrapped in a cocoon of drugs and shock. He lights a Rubios, starts a pocket recorder, and says to tell him everything you know, start at the beginning in Alaska when you were a kid. You comply, half expecting his face to deform at any moment. Takes a while to relate the tale, takes an eon, in fact. Agent Steele doesn't interrupt and when you finish he thanks you for your service to your country, best to never speak of this incident again, Tooms was shot resisting arrest for extradition to the USA, and so forth. You're weak and fading, yet you clutch his sleeve and ask what's it all about, ask what the flat affects are, where they come from, why were you, lowly you, lured to Mexico, and you know what the answer is before it doesn't come. You have so many damned theories burning a hole in your imagination. Could be you babble about space vampires, demonic possession, and Count D his own bad self. Steele smiles as if the cigarette in his hand comes with a blindfold. He leans in close and whispers that he's seen this all before, it's always worse than you think, says it no longer matters. Go home, screw your wife,

pet your dog, relive your glory days with a six-pack and a bowl. The fat lady is working on her arpeggios.

Your buddy Felix, an ex Naval Intelligence officer with connections across the US and Europe, and who also doses himself daily with LSD and vaporized marijuana while listening to talk radio, won't permit dogs into his trailer because *everybody* knows the ID chips implanted at the veterinarian's office are military grade transceivers beaming info to spy satellites. He has a theory about Mr. Flat Affect. It's insane and you also think it has merit. Felix disappears one day, leaves a roach smoldering in the ashtray, a spackle of blood in a tight pattern on the ceiling directly above his easy chair. The police park a van across the street from your apartment for a month, then. Nobody contacts you.

The power goes dead after midnight and you lie there, a bundle of twigs, staring out the window, praying for the town lights, any of them, to return. Only stars, the black body of darkness. Chip pads in and sits, muzzle pointed at you. He is a pure black shadow. You begin to cry, terror squeezing tears from your ducts. Amie grips your shoulder, says she has something to tell you, baby. That's when you know the jig is up, the power's never coming back on, you've seen the last of the light, because Amie and Chip died years and years ago. You close your eyes and visualize the faces at Tooms' basement party, the faces in that deathroom at the Mexico City hotel. The images move with the sluggishness of a dream. Your friends and enemies only watch pop-eyed and motionless as you flee. Some wear the demented un-mask that drips with earth from the grave. They might've loved or hated you before the rostrum made its pith stroke. Now they grin as you flee, your bare feet slapping a treadmill that bores endlessly through a cosmic honeycomb. None of you are going anywhere.

Slave Arm



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…andbegin, again.

Don't begin with a white room, it's not, it's a black room. Hothouse humid, oasis in the subarctic night. A glitter ball strobes, synched with the aurora borealis, the background radiation of the stars. Scandalously clad kids slam dance to a metal band, the bass player wears an executioner's hood, the lead singer has a beard like the front man for Clutch. Smokes a cheroot, swills whiskey, and breathes fire. Benny Three-Trees and Jasper Hostettler were flown in from Anchorage and Fairbanks to make sure this party's got its favors. Blotter, X, Jack Daniels, vodka, tequila, blow, crystal, hash, peyote, smack, Black Bombers, Viagra, California Gold, Matanuska Thunderfuck, nitrous. Window glass quivers like jelly in Dixie cup shooters. It's three a.m. Fuck the police. Your friends are here. Your enemies are here. Everybody you've ever slept with is here. Except Jessica. She's off wandering the earth, righting wrongs. You'll never see her again. That leaves Tom, Margie, Rod, Bill, Thurman, Shelley, Frank, Lisa, Becka, Tomra, Justin, Everett, Kurt, Mina, Tabby, Klein, Regan, Merrit, Luther, Jackson, Morton, Tashondra, Donte, Violet, Simon, Bart, Darcy, Sarah, Clute, Bowie, Pilar, Carol, Eric, Camilla, Brian, Jason, John, Lori, Miller, Parish, Will, Nick, Berrian, Jody, Chandler, Mary, Erin, Clay, Tobias, Judith, Rich, Nelson, Warren, Bob, Sam, Philip, Castor, Steely J, Julie Five, Newhouse, Cole, Esteban, Amy, Tyree, Vernon, Esther, Glenn, Kate, Kathy, Mark, Mark, Jake, Lucy, Ashley, Kyla, River, Arrow, Marsha, Cory, Stephen, Roger, Glory, Grant, Howard, Flynn, Victor, Bubba, Samantha, Custer, Alabama, Truman, Rupert, June, Ruby, Kirsten, Kevin, Lambert, Robard, Dickie, Ralph, Quinn, Hester, Felix, Dusty, Paul, Byron, Kareem, James, Gunther, Abelard, Queenie, Suri, Rochelle, Theodore, Brunhilde, Molly, Cooper, Wanda, Morris, Michelle, Tammy-Lynn,

Starling, Hector, Earl, Kellen, Tiberius, Chance, Dakota, Monson, Spencer, Wayne, Lily, Ramses, Chuck, Portia, Terry, Terri, Trish, Craig, Delaney, Vance, Ed, Carmine, Russo, Penny, Ferris, Noah. The last two are a pair again after a few years apart. Sweet. You don't know the rest, the hangers on, freeloaders, strangers. Moving shadows. The happening is happening at the ancestral home of young rotund Zane Tooms himself, poor rich boy, wannabe Satanist, friend to no one no matter how cool his digs may be, and they are indeed cool. A three-story mansion and an unfinished basement. Basement expands deep into the hillside, ancient bear den, crumbled arches, moldering catacombs, bat roosts, portal to Pluto's Ballroom. Downhill, a lovely hillside, a copse of spruce trees, boulders, a field where fireweed grows; farther on lies the bay, ink-black under a tilted moon, cracked. Moms and Pops jetted to Acapulco for the weekend and the mice will riot. Upstairs in the master suite, you've got your cock halfway into that Ukrainian transfer student, the cheerleader, what's-her-name, and she's throwing her blonde head like a mare, impatient. You're thinking ouch, and man, this is a hell of a fancy bed, are these sheets satin, is the demon-face headboard mahogany, and good God what's with the creepy Gothic architecture anyway, and who's that guy walking into the frame? Is it the cheerleader's boyfriend, what's-his-name, captain of the varsity squad, 'cause that would be very bad, you'd want your steel toe boots for an ape with forearms like he's swinging. No, not the jock. Wait, is that *Russo*? Definitely looks like Russo who runs the forklift on the fresh floor of the cannery. Different though, filling the doorway, cropped hair, pale complexion, eye shadow thick enough for a *Star Trek* cameo, original series, features smoothed and stretched plastic masklike, loose dark shirt and too-tight pants tucked into combat boots. Hefts a club, or a mace, a car axle, something out of a medieval manual of slaughter, two and a half feet of steel wrapped in barbed wire, electric tape on the grip, funny the photographic detail your brain records in moments of stress. The girl kisses your neck, she hasn't seen the freak. It's all wrong. Uncanny resemblance notwithstanding, this isn't the Russo you were blazing with on the loading dock just yesterday, not the Russo who's got a thing for the color grader from Caltech, not the Russo who lost his license drag racing on the Parks Highway and needs a lift everywhere, not the one who's built for a run at the middleweight title but wouldn't hurt a fly, the pacifist, conscientious

objector, tofu-munching emo rocker. *This* Russo has taken an ice pick to the brain and become Mr. Flat Affect. He licks his liver lips, and Gene Simmons would shit a brick at the yellow tongue drooped to that pointy chin. Mr. Flat Affect crosses the room in an awkward lunge, the way a toad suddenly decides to jump, and it's so fast your breath stops. You roll off the opposite half of that acre of satin and the club wallops the cheerleader instead of your naked ass. Prior to this moment you've always considered yourself a bit of a tough guy. Lean, mean, scars on your knuckles from a respectable number of barroom brawls; only last fall you socked Tom Gorski in the kisser after one wisecrack too many, dropped him like a bad habit. You're no punk, no wuss, no pantywaist, had your nose busted plenty, lost some teeth in the bargain. You have also come to the realization you aren't Chuck Norris either. The bludgeoning thuds are a message from the universe. You're no shark, you're a feeder fish, aren't you? The interloper whacks her a couple of times, lazy and disinterested. There's blood, a lot of it, all those September hunts when Dad shot the caribou with his .7mm and you slashed the dumb beast's throat and its life gushed out over your Wellies, this is similar. You make your move and fly for the door. You're howling. Demon Russo would catch you, because next to him you're stuck in quicksand, but the club gets snagged in a nest of guts and that second or two is all you need to escape. It's dark and the house is a maze. You've visited twice during daylight when it was just the Tooms family and everybody in polo shirts and golf slacks, sunny dispositions, dinner on the deck with the gob smacking view of Settler's Bay. This is the nightmare version of that scenario, the Bizarro World iteration. Doors are locked and impenetrable. Music rumbles far below and nobody responds to you screaming bloody murder. An accent lamp floats in a golden bubble way down at the end of the hall and you sprint for it, jagged claws of your shadow outstretched in desperation.

Even all these years after the fact, you recall the cheerleader's expression in a smash close-up. Homegirl doesn't know she's dead, keeps blinking at you, confused as she drowns on herself.

Your father dies in a tavern parking lot when you are twenty-two. Your mother goes home to Tennessee, sends postcards now and again, the weather's fine. Little brother joins the Marines, like his old man, earns a Bronze Star, opens a gun store in Texas, shoots a couple of kids who try to rob the joint. The jury decides he's justified. You sleep with a lot of women with the light on, lose your erection whenever you stop to think. There are nightmares. One that recurs has you as a child in your old bedroom, you stand near the dresser and a poster of Buck Rogers. A skinny hand and arm slither from beneath your bed, followed by your father. Except his face is angular and cold with alien emotion. He moves the herky-jerky way a marionette does. He wants your blood, projects that desire into your thoughts without opening his mouth. You always awaken before he gets you. Hell of it is, you don't know whether it's really a dream or a suppressed memory. So, you drink. We won't speak of wife one.

Wife two is Amie. You stole her from Mack the slack, Mack jumped off the bridge into Hurricane Gulch. Oh, Amie, baby, who wouldn't? Brunette, Libra, whip smart, hot as fire. Most importantly, she doesn't give a goddamn how screwed up you are, how wild and strange you are, how damaged, or else she cleverly looks past it to the good points. You have several. Got all your hair, make a decent wage in construction, still cut pretty sharp in a suit. Two of three children tolerate your presence; the dog is also fond. The dog is a German Shepherd you named Chip because of a story that science fiction author Bradley Denton wrote when you were a kid. You and Chip go hunting for ptarmigan every fall, the only good thing you can recall sharing with your dad. Last September you load the guns and drive out to the Little Susitna, follow a game trail away from the Parks Highway, three, maybe four miles where the spruce grows tall and close in, a mossy shadow land. Crack yourself a cool beer, prop against a tree, loyal hound at your feet, the sun a pale reflection against the underside of the canopy. Even sweet wife fades into the ether for a while. Chip looses a stream of piss and whines and then you hear, echoing from not too far away in the arboreal deeps, the most sinister birdcall ever. Laughter of a raven mimicking a man mimicking a hyena. Cackles your name, calls to Chip.

C’mere, doggy! This lone cry becomes a chorus, converging. Shotgun or not, you and the dog run for your lives. That shrieking laughter pursues you nearly back to the car. You break the speed limit gunning for home, Chip cowers on the floorboard, fangs bared as if some horror rides in the back seat. *We’re waiting for you, pal. We know where you live.*

Zane Tooms got on the Tony Robbins bandwagon and dropped sixty pounds, tried to make something of himself, didn’t try all that hard. Heartthrob handsome after the sea change, but fat wasn’t truly the root of his problems. Something dark and rotten was going on in that noggin. Capped teeth and a chiseled physique couldn’t mitigate the filth beaming from his eyes. He lived alone in that mansion on the hill after Mr. and Mrs. died. Spent his nights at the Bohemian cocktail lounge hitting on the young lasses, became known as the Rohypnol Romeo, bought himself an indictment with a suggested sentencing range of twenty-five to life if it stuck. Blew town and disappeared to the bottom of the FBI most-wanted list. Sends you a letter the day before Christmas, first contact after a decade of silence, arrives in a grimy, blood-spotted envelope, sum of the message a Mexico City phone number, initials *ZT*, smudgy fingerprints all over the stationery. You are wary, but intrigued. There’s a twenty-five-thousand-dollar reward, which you don’t give a shit about, money isn’t a problem for you anymore, you have questions, you have a redaction scribble in the middle of your brain where dreadful memories once clamored for release. You want to talk to fat boy Tooms, want to wring his neck, beg him to put the pieces together. He’s living under an assumed name in a fancy hotel on the outskirts, keeps a whole suite to himself. His transformation impresses, dresses in a linen suit, smokes French cigarettes, seems at ease in his own expat skin, but you recognize him, the real him, instantly. You don’t talk about what he’s done, don’t mention the fact FBI and INTERPOL are on the case, could be staking out the joint at that very moment, recording everything for the blockbuster trial. That’s a foregone conclusion, written in the stars. You’re here for other unfinished business. He pours two glasses of mescal, no lime, no nothing, utters a prayer and downs his, then flashes a revolver and says he asked you here to apologize or to kill you. It depends.

Actually, that's a lie, he's already made up his mind, he wants to chat first, so drink your drink, old friend, and you do. Once everything's cozy, you've chuckled over the hijinks of days of yore, his finger relaxes from the trigger and you ask what the hell man? What happened way back when in the bear den beneath the house? He smiles sadly, professes ignorance, but his eyes belong to a snake and though you ask again, nicely, he refuses to answer truly. He was a child then, he dicked about with childish things, any real diabolism that resulted is purely coincidental. The room spins as you go belly up. They don't call the bastard the Rohypnol Romeo for nothing. In the half-dozen beats until the world goes dark you watch a tremor pass through him, crown to toe, and your subconscious wants to make an impossible connection, suggests he's a finger puppet of some primordial malevolence and it's show time. The flesh of his face snaps upward, much as a bank robber pulls on a nylon mask, except from the wrong direction. Hello to Mr. Flat Affect, your old friend.

Okay, we'll mention wife one, briefly. Her post-coital cigarette didn't package with a *what are you thinking.* Hers was a beady-eyed scowl and a demand to know what your damage was. What had happened to fuck you so thoroughly up, she couldn't begin to fathom. Were you molested as a child? Did Daddy piss in your cornflakes? Did something *awful* transpire to make you so afraid of the dark? You loved her, you desired her happiness with the intensity of a death wish. But you couldn't tell her what was buried in your heart, couldn't articulate the queasy blackness that flooded your mind whenever you tried. If you knew where she'd run off to after your marriage fireballed, you could call her up, tell her about the time you visit Mexico to meet a childhood chum and come to taped hand and foot upon the ledge of a marble tub, IV needle in your femoral artery, half your blood oozing drip by drip through a tube into gallon bags. Classical music plays. There's a muttered conversation that you can't understand, and not because blood pressure drop causes your ears to ring, nor because the voices are muttering in Spanish. It's because whatever language is formed by this combination of glottal stops, clicks and liquid hisses, it isn't human. You manage to peel free of the tape, slick with your fluids as it is, the heat of the room, and slide

over the rim of the tub into a heap. You vomit. That's what happens when blood pressure drops to nil. Keep crawling toward the light, all you can do, coherent thought is water through a dribble glass, it makes a mess on your shirt. Three of them stand in the parlor with your host. They wear variations on the face of the grave and very nice suits. There's a naked body curled upon a rubber mat. The body is bound in barbed wire and one of the men, Armani suit and snazzy shoes, sips from a red tube inserted at the victim's neck. Everybody pauses to stare at you, including the dead or dying guy, his glassy eyes are wet as you drag yourself past, hand over hand. His eyes reflect your antlike toil across the killing floor. Maybe he's reenacting Horace Greasley's great escape vicariously through you. Maybe he's already there. The front door swings open and uniformed men burst through screaming slave*Policía*! Their assault rifles start flashing and the room fills with clouds of dust and smoke. You crawl onward, past threshing jackboots and smoldering shell cases. Explosions and screams continue unabated. It goes on and on. Longest movie you've ever been in. Later at the hospital a tall handsome American sits at your bedside. Tubes everywhere, but at least the fluids are going into you this time. The man introduces himself as Agent Justin Steele. He flashes a badge and declares who he works for, although none of it sticks in your consciousness, you're wrapped in a cocoon of drugs and shock. He lights a Rubios, starts a pocket recorder, and says to tell him everything you know, start at the beginning in Alaska when you were a kid. You comply, half expecting his face to deform at any moment. Takes a while to relate the tale, takes an eon, in fact. Agent Steele doesn't interrupt and when you finish he thanks you for your service to your country, best to never speak of this incident again, Tooms was shot resisting arrest for extradition to the USA, and so forth. You're weak and fading, yet you clutch his sleeve and ask what's it all about, ask what the flat affects are, where they come from, why were you, lowly you, lured to Mexico, and you know what the answer is before it doesn't come. You have so many damned theories burning a hole in your imagination. Could be you babble about space vampires, demonic possession, and Count D his own bad self. Steele smiles as if the cigarette in his hand comes with a blindfold. He leans in close and whispers that he's seen this all before, it's always worse than you think, says it no longer matters. Go home, screw your wife, pet your

dog, relive your glory days with a six-pack and a bowl. The end that Eliot spoke of is snuffling at the door.

Your buddy Felix, an ex-Naval Intelligence officer with connections across the US and Europe, and who also doses himself daily with LSD and vaporized marijuana while listening to talk radio, won't permit dogs into his trailer because *everybody* knows the ID chips implanted at the veterinarian's office are military grade transceivers beaming info to spy satellites. He has a theory about Mr. Flat Affect. It's insane and you also think it has merit. Felix disappears one day, leaves a roach smoldering in the ashtray, a spackle of blood in a tight pattern on the ceiling directly above his easy chair. The police park a van across the street from your apartment for a month. Nobody contacts you.

The power goes dead after midnight and you lie there, a bundle of twigs, staring out the window, praying for the town lights, any of them, to return. Only stars, the black body of darkness. Chip pads in and sits, muzzle pointed at you. He is a pure black shadow. You begin to cry, terror squeezing tears from your ducts. Amie grips your shoulder, says she has something to tell you, baby. That's when you know the jig is up, the power's never coming back on, you've seen the last of the light, because Amie and Chip died years and years ago. You close your eyes and visualize the faces at Tooms' basement party, the faces in that deathroom at the Mexico City hotel. The images move with the sluggishness of a dream. Your friends and enemies only watch pop-eyed and motionless as you flee the brute and his club. Some observers wear the demented un-mask that drips with earth from the grave. They might've loved or hated you before the rostrum made its pith stroke. Now they grin as you run, your bare feet slapping a treadmill that bores endlessly through a cosmic honeycomb. None of you are going anywhere.

Black Dog

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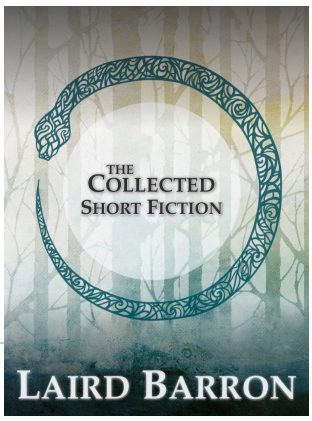


While waiting at the table and watching the door he found himself humming “Love Will Tear Us Apart” under his breath.

She walked into the restaurant two minutes late. She dusted cigarette ashes off the sleeve of her coat and hugged him and accepted the rose he’d brought. First date and the rose was the nicest of the bunch, wrapped in baby’s breath and pink tissue paper. He’d destroyed some other pretty nice flowers to get this sucker out of the refrigerated cabinet at the store. He’d also gotten stabbed by a thorn, and it made him wonder if this might be a sign from whatever gods watch over the chariot races of the Hippodrome of Romance.

They sat across from one another for a few moments without speaking. Her eyes were brown. No, her eyes were green. The glow from the lamps changed them moment by moment. Looking into their depths disoriented him as if the building might be rotating upon the crest of a wave. He noticed two things: the top button of her blouse was undone and his collar felt a little tight. Also, the room seemed warm. He gulped some water, but the ice had melted and the water went down his throat like blood.

“Your eyes change color,” she said.

“I get lizard eye. When I’m tired. Or in a mood.”

“In the mood?”

“*A* mood.”

She raised her brow and tried her water. Her throat moved and he regarded the patterns in the canopy overhanging the walkway.

Dusk was upon the world again. It was All Hallows Eve. The sky glowed as softly as the belly of a wine bottle. Street lights and lights in shop fronts were flickering to life along the slope of the avenue. The breeze through an open window tasted of wildflowers and moss and dying leaves. Her scent was lilac in his nose.

He'd been drinking. Scotch on the rocks. Probably not enough of it, though. When she removed her coat, he noted that the flesh of her arms was bruised purple. He breathed in the smell of her and observed how her skin shone, how her breast rose and fell, how her lips curved enigmatically, and nope, definitely not enough with the drinking for him.

"Wasn't something there a minute ago?" She pointed to the sidewalk and the sandwich board sign that advertised the restaurant.

"A big fucking black dog," he said. He'd seen the dog all right—huge and shaggy, black as the heart of night. Foam curdled its muzzle. Its tongue had lolled as it grinned at him from where it reclined at the foot of the sign. "Red eyes. Kinda spooky."

"Red eyes like in a photograph, or red eyes like the wolves in a Disney cartoon?"

"Red eyes like a vampire in a motherfucking Hammer flick." Wow *fucking*, then *motherfucking*, no less, and in under the first twenty seconds. A personal best. He finished his scotch and loosened his collar and stared at the patch of sidewalk where the enormous black dog had lain moments ago. Had there been a leash? A master? He couldn't picture the scene anymore. He remembered the last of the sunlight in its eyes, however. Those eyes were suddenly coals ignited by a breath, and its wide, friendly smile hinted at a sort of knowingness.

"That's not good," she said.

"It's gone now. I've got no problem with dogs. Seemed friendly. Just odd, is all."

"No, no, it's bad luck. Or, wait. Not bad luck—a bad omen. To see the black hound means death for you or someone close to you."

"Oh. Where do you get that?"

“Britain. A legend from over there. My dad went and lived on the moors when he graduated from school. He photographed mounds and menhirs, pillaged tombs. That sort of thing.”

“He’s an archeologist?”

“Dad?” She laughed. Soft and lovely. “Hell no.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s dead.”

“May I have another?” He quickly raised his empty glass to the passing server. “I’m sorry.”

“Makes one of us.”

“Ma’am, a double on that scotch, eh?” Yeah, his collar just kept cinching in like a noose.

“What about you?” She studied him now. Focused upon him with an intensity that caused his heart to flutter.

“My old man is alive and well and living in Lincoln, Montana. He races huskies. We don’t talk.”

“Lucky you.”

“Trust me, it ain’t luck. Years and years of effort.”

“Any kids? Wife? Girlfriend?”

“One dog, an ex, my work. Back at you.”

“A cavalier King Charles spaniel. I’ve never been married. What kind of dog is yours?”

“A pit bull. I rescued her. She’s sweet and gentle.”

She nodded. “That’s what everybody says right before their darling takes off an arm.”

“Don’t care for them, eh?”

“I had a bad experience. Where did you grow up?”

“Alaska,” he said. “My dad was a hunter.”

“Yes… and so the huskies. I think it’s cruel to put a harness on an animal.”

“How about a saddle?”

“Ha. Screw the Kentucky Derby. Horse racing should be abolished. Don’t you agree?”

“Nice weather, isn’t it?” He studied his place setting.

“Totally. I spent the day looking at houses for my mom. She’s in Florida.”

“She’s moving back north. How nice for you.”

“Nah. She just likes to shop online. Takes one of those video tours and convinces me to see the joint in person and report. She put in a bid on a place last month and then canceled it. Decided the staircase was too narrow to lug her king-sized bed up to the second floor. Jesus Christ. No way she’s coming back to New York. She’d freeze.”

“Why does she send you around to recon then?”

“She’s a sweet old bird. Who the hell knows why she does what she does?”

The server came with another scotch for him and more ice water for her. They ordered dinner. She requested noodles and something else. He chose the fried rice without giving a damn.

“You’re divorced, huh? What went wrong?”

“I was a neglectful bastard.”

“Really? You seem different.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Good.”

“Are you seeing anyone?” he said because she’d deflected the question earlier. It seemed impossible that she wasn’t. For the love of God, just look at her. He’d already decided not to involve himself in any triangles, had resolved to get up and walk out depending upon the answer. A brief, early sting was easiest in his estimation.

“Am I seeing anyone… Huh. Two months ago, my boyfriend left me for his ex. That one broke my heart.” She glanced at her hands, toying with the rings, then swung back to meet his gaze. “At the moment it’s you, only you.”

He still wasn’t certain whether that was a yes or a no. Another sip, another moment spent lingering upon the lines of her jaw and neck, the sweep of

her clavicle, and the strength to move drained from him. He wished like hell that he enjoyed mysteries.

What did he know, then? She was in her thirties. She clerked at the library. She was a karate instructor at a local school—thus the bruised arms from being thrown down on a mat. That's where they'd first met a couple of years back. He'd flown into town to visit friends, a whistle-stop before driving down to his book signing at a literary bar in the city. His friends, who also attended the school, dragged him to their dojo to meet the gang. She arrived on the scene, knotting her second degree black belt and wham, he was smitten. He'd been married at the time, so he shook her hand and smiled and ignored the sparks that shot out of their fingers and into each other.

A lot had changed in three years. But not her.

His pulse thrilled and that worried him. Married forever and a day, then suddenly alone again, and absorbed in his writing, he'd almost forgotten the rush that accompanied the new and the unknown. He felt a curious and unwelcome sense of vulnerability that reminded him of his youth, of plowing headlong into a towering blizzard. Since the divorce he'd spoken to many women. Here was the first one to get his heart beating faster.

So, he tasted his drink and gloomily acknowledged that the tremor in his hand, the faint sickness in his soul, meant she was getting under his skin in a big way. He sighed and smiled at her and vowed, for the umpteenth time so far, not to say anything stupid, or misanthropic, or inane.

The angel on his shoulder laughed and laughed at that one.

Full darkness arrived. They migrated outdoors.

She took a pack of Camel No. 9s from her coat and lighted one. She smoked and watched him from the corner of her eye. He stood on the sidewalk and breathed heavily. He felt as winded as a prizefighter who'd survived into the later rounds. A cold breeze dried the sweat on his brow. The moon drifted over the black curve of the horizon. Full and radiant as a searchlight, the moon smoldered in the void, frozen as close to them as it would be for another million years.

The couple moved on after a while, stepping through bands of shadow cast by the interlaced branches of lithe potted magnolias and oaks. Many of the shops were locking up. The watchmaker and the baker hunched behind cold display cases, counting tills. A girl in an apron pushed a broom and smiled wistfully. Small groups of college kids drifted between the soft neon oases of bars and restaurants. There were fairy wings, a toga, some glitter and face paint, but few had bothered to get dressed for Halloween. A man played a violin in a second floor window over a darkened bookstore. The musician was a brawny, shirtless lad. Sweat wisped from his glistening shoulders. He nodded gravely and sawed with vigor as they passed.

"Love it," she said. "My brother plays the cello. Damned good. Make you cry." Her shoulder bumped his. "Ah, now check it. This used to be a swell art gallery." She indicated a deserted shop front. The placard promised the impending advent of a chain Irish pub. "Alas, the poor Krams. I knew them, Horatio. Lived here their entire lives, had local artists and poets in all the time. Robert Creeley read here, once. *The* Robert fucking Creeley. Nobody wants art, though. Nobody wants poetry. What they want is another bloody pub the same as every other cookie cutter pub. I hear the Irish mob had a hand in running my friends out."

"Where'd the owners go?" he said, thanking God she'd taken the pressure off him by cursing. He put his hands into his pockets, then took them out again. He wished he'd remembered to bring gum. His bum knee hurt. A panel van rolled by, slow as a shark on the cruise. Its plates were splattered in black mud.

"Yonder." She waved in the direction of the Catskills.

"That reminds me. There are caves nearby."

"Caves everywhere around these parts. Why do you ask?"

"Something about the mafia or Prohibition I overheard. Maybe the War of Independence. My memory is shot."

"Hm. There's also the Iron Mountain facility. They store all kinds of documents in some limestone caves in Rosendale. Hush-hush stuff."

"Aha." He watched the van's taillights dwindle. "I also heard some murders happened here in town. Gruesome was the word."

“Sure. Those are still going on, though. Have been since the ’70s. Cops never bagged anybody. Never will.”

“Serial killer?”

She stopped. Her face was luminous as if animated by the prospect of blood. He fell in love, just a little bit, then and there. “Uh, huh. Creepo snatches hikers and joggers and street people. Leaves them in the woods. Maybe seven, eight years ago, a Boy Scout troop stumbled upon eleven decomposed corpses in a cavern along the Wallkill. What kinda merit badge do you get for that, I wonder?”

“Hold up a sec. The seventies? Forty years, give or take. That seems like a long time for one guy to be about this sort of business.”

“I bet it’s a family thing,” she said. “Pop passes it down to the eldest son the way tradesmen did during the agrarian era. Some kind of whacked traditionalist.”

“Lurid as lurid can be, yet, it never made the national news…”

“It made the news. Twenty-four hour cycle is the problem. Today it’s a mass grave, tomorrow it’s back to celebrity meltdowns and the peccadilloes of the rich and the beautiful.”

He stared at the moon and thought about her explanation.

“Are you here to research the case?” she said.

“No. My book is about an ornithologist. He dies in a valley in the mountains. Birds eat him.”

“Ah, you’re researching birds.”

“I’m here for you.”

Her turn to scrutinize the moon and not say anything.

They kept on. Residential houses now—old, Gothic models that he’d noticed were common here in the Hudson Valley. Iron fences and lushly neglected yards. Televisions flickered blue in certain windows, projecting phantom lovemaking, train wrecks, explosions, murder. Fires glowed inside jack-o’-lanterns. Lawn gnomes crouched with feral aspects in the long, wet grass.

He loved how she walked. Somewhere between a sway and a shuffle, arms swinging loose, head turning on a swivel in the manner of every professional fighter he'd ever known. She possessed a sort of animal grace that wasn't conscious of itself, but alert to everything occurring within its environment. Heat emanated from her in waves.

He shivered. "Do you go armed, considering the situation?"

"Yeah, sometimes. When I'm not sure of where I'm headed or who I'm meeting. Then I carry a blade."

"Got it on you now?"

"Nope." She kind of smiled and patted his arm. "Didn't figure I needed it. Besides, *I'm* a weapon. You're safe as houses with me."

"I'm sure."

"Ask me where I got the knife."

"The knife you should be packing, but aren't?"

"Yep. Haha, I did carry it this afternoon when I met the realtor."

"Okay. Where did you get the knife?"

"From the Sneaky Fucking Russian."

"Let me guess—he's a karate guy."

She grinned. "Right on. Speaking of the mob, this dude's got the swagger. Broken nose and gin blossoms, wears heavy jewelry and a track suit. Thick accent. Eyes like pennies. A scowl mean enough to make a Spetsnaz drop his AK. Kinda skulks around. He asked me out about a hundred times when he first arrived at the dojo. He got more and more belligerent about the whole thing. Finally he exploded and demanded to know what was wrong with me that I wouldn't date him. Shouting and stomping his foot, the whole routine. I told him this was unacceptable behavior and to piss off before he got kicked out onto the street. Very tedious."

"Ah, an old school eastern gentleman. I like those guys all right."

"Do you?"

"Yeah. They tend to be tough, loyal, no nonsense types. I got a soft spot for that. He'd probably make a great boyfriend after you slap him around a little."

“Sure, it isn’t you he’s trying to feel up when you’re sparring.”

“Fair enough. Does he know you call him the Sneaky Fucking Russian?”

She snorted and laughed. “Uh, no. Are you going to listen to the rest of the story? I’m not finished.”

“Tell me.”

“So, right. A couple of months go by. The Sneaky Fucking Russian keeps training, but he avoids me like the plague. Won’t so much as glance in my direction. One night he comes over to me with flowers and a small box wrapped in a bow. I’m thinking, oh shit, here we go again, but he holds up his hand and says, ‘No, no, I was wrong to speak to you in that manner. You are strong American woman and I am the dirt under your shoes. I am not fit to kiss your foot.’ Then he gives me the box…”

“Thus the knife.”

“Yep!”

“What kind is it?”

She shrugged. “What do you mean? It’s a knife.”

“I mean is it a Randall, a Gerber, a Ka-Bar…?”

“Oh. Well, I don’t know. It folds.”

“You should get a fixed blade and keep it on you.”

“Thanks, Dad. I told you, I’m a weapon.” She was quiet for a long moment. “Death doesn’t frighten me. I’ve died plenty of times.”

“How does that work?” He squeezed her hand and let it go. “You feel warm enough.”

“*Everybody* has died. When I was six I went sledding and hit a concrete retaining wall under the snow. Felt my neck crack and everything faded to white. When the world came back into focus I was right as rain, but…”

“I understand,” he said. The booze made him a bit giddy. He remembered a long ago storm on Norton Sound, the rasp of diamond-bright snow scouring the ice, a universe of white; his hands were blurred shadows groping for purchase, and all around him, inside him, a constant dull roar. “And for a few hours after you came to, everything was in too sharp focus. Everything was too real.”

“Yes! Too shiny, too present. I felt like a ghost floating through a world that had materialized just to accommodate me. By the next day I’d forgotten. Sometimes it comes back when I dream, or at odd moments.”

“Like tonight.”

“Maybe a little.” She gave him a sidelong glance. Her eyes were ringed like a raccoon’s and they shone with wary innocence. “The portal opens on All Hallows. Tonight is the night to do a séance or summon a spirit, if that’s what floats your boat. All possibilities are viable.”

“How many times has it happened? The return from the dead bit?”

“Three. You?”

He considered. “Eleven or twelve.”

“Jeez, dude! What the hell were you doing before you started writing?”

“Misspending my youth. Drinking, fighting, whoring around. Tramping across ice packs and climbing mountains. The usual for where I grew up.”

“Can’t leave it there. Tell me a story.”

“Oh, how about I do that on our next date? Give you something to look forward to.”

“What makes you think there’s going to be another date?” She smiled. “Come along, tell.”

“I drowned once when I was a kid,” he said. “Fell in the creek. Dad had to press the water out of my lungs and get me going again. Another time, very late in the winter, I was training a string of huskies on the Susitna River. The ice gave way under my sled and I went into the black water as deep as my chest before the team somehow dragged me free. There wasn’t any bottom to that river. That current is strong and it’ll just plain suck you under. Basically a miracle I survived. Got shanked in a bar fight in Dutch Harbor. A deckhand stuck me with a big ass filet knife. Except that’s not quite what happened—damned if the point didn’t bounce off my chest. Not even a bruise, but I saw my life go pouring out onto the sawdust floor anyhow. There you go. Three stories for the price of one.”

She chewed her thumbnail and kept walking, half a stride ahead. She said, “I’m a bitch after you get to know me.”

“How many dates in is that, would you say?”

“Usually halfway through the first one. I like my space. Everything tends to be about me, me, me.”

“Everything?”

“I’m all I’ve got.”

“You’ve been fucked over. That’s coming through loud and clear.”

“With a vengeance,” she said.

“Okay,” he said.

“Thought it might be useful information. I’d hate to disappoint you down the road.”

“That doesn’t sound so selfish.”

“I like to make people smile, but I hate them too. Ah, the essential dichotomy of me. It might drive you crazy. You’ll love me, but you’ll be a mad dog.”

He chuckled. “The damage was done long before we met. Are you happy?”

“I’m happy and I’m never bored. I’ve always thought I was meant for great things. But, all that happens is I keep getting older.”

“You’re in a rut. Press your face to the grindstone and that’s all you can see. Same friends, same colleagues, same scenery. The years roll over into one another. Happiness and misery become intertwined.”

“I like my rut,” she said.

“People always think they do. It’s either that or slit your wrists.”

Streetlights stretched farther and farther apart. The night deepened. They came to a bridge with rusty girders. The water below gleamed in moonlit streaks.

“I’ve lived in this town for twenty years and never walked across this bridge,” she said.

“Tonight is the night?” he said. “For séances and a bridge crossing?”

“Yeah. Watch out for the ghost of the Hessian.” She pulled her collar tight and winked.

He counted sixty-six steps, measuring each stride with the precision his father, a Marine, had instilled within him. Being slightly drunk concentrated his mind, oddly enough. Seventy-six steps saw them atop a gravel embankment that functioned as a turnout for cars. A heavily trodden path began just off the white line of the road and immediately forked. One path descended to the river; the other climbed a hillock toward a copse of gaunt trees and a jumble of rocks. She plucked his sleeve and led the way upward.

The largest, flattest stone shone white. She brushed aside a litter of dead leaves and primly seated herself upon its surface and beckoned him. For a time they sat, shoulder to shoulder; she smoking, he watching the lights of the town and the headlights sparkling along the road. The wind rose in brief gusts and branches moaned in the surrounding woods.

"This is romantic," he said, putting his arm around her. She didn't move one way or another.

"They say there was a grove here once," she said. "During colonial times those white settlers who followed the Old Gods cultivated this hillside, planted oak and sage and conducted rituals. Naturally, the Christians eventually squashed them. Hanged the 'witches' from the trees, or drowned them in the river. The grove was razed to ash and this stone became known as the White Spot."

He raised his head to examine the few scraggly trees that poked from the dense soil, claws raking free of a grave. "Nothing good grows here, I take it."

"Stunted, emaciated shadows of the grand oaks of days gone by. The ground is supposedly cursed, but I come here all the same. I feel drawn like a flake of metal hurtling toward a giant magnet. There's a current in the earth, a conduit. It speaks to my blood."

The moon floated across the near pane of sky, visibly traveling like a golden sail on the night sea. She inclined her head toward him and they gazed into each other's eyes. A charge arced from her and into him. His vision doubled. He beheld himself kneeling before her naked form, lips pressed to her sweet hip while the great and deathly blizzard that nearly killed him once raged against the walls of a landlocked cabin. He had the sense of the moon plunging toward the earth, the dissolution of himself

within the following shockwave. As he dissolved, the lilac taste of her was the last artifact of his being to go into that good night. A dog or a wolf howled.

She touched his neck and her hand was cool. She said, “What’s wrong?”

“Must be the Great Conjunction, or too heavy on the booze,” he said, shuddering free of the illusion.

“No conjunctions tonight. Plenty of single malt, though.” She laughed and kneaded his arm. Her fingers were very strong.

“I like your bruises,” he said. “Sexy as hell.”

“You are a little nuts, aren’t you?” she said and kissed him on the mouth. She was sweet with lip gloss and smoke and spearmint gum.

His toes curled. He thought of the Stevens poem about the wind in the hemlocks and the tails of the peacocks and the dead leaves turning in the fire as the planets aligned and turned outside the window. Fear and exultation turned within him. The wind and the cold in his chest receded, growling.

She separated from him slightly and said, “*And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.*” She licked her lips. “Sometimes I can read minds. Ever since that sledding accident.”

He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. “Precognition. Usually during dreams, but occasionally when I’m walking down the street or chatting on the phone… Zaps me like a bolt from the blue. Too unpredictable or else I’d hop a plane to Vegas and rake it in. Eerie, though.”

“That explains your perspicacity.”

He kissed her again.

Finally, she said, “All night I’ve had a feeling of impending doom.”

“I’d say everything has turned up aces so far.”

“Maybe, maybe. Can’t last. Romance with me is fraught with peril. Consider yourself duly warned.”

Clouds rolled across the stars and covered the moon.

“Hm, the gods agree,” he said, noticing the abrupt and precipitous chill that slithered over his flesh and into his bones. He felt her breath against his

face, but could barely see the shine of her eyes.

She trembled and tightened her grip on his arms. “All the lights are out. Everywhere.”

The chill intensified as he realized that she was indeed correct. While they’d been distracted, a vast, cosmic hand had erased the town below them with a sweep of darkness. Fog and cloud covered the world. The rock vibrated beneath them and small stones cascaded away toward the water. In the near distance a metallic shriek rent the silence. Its echoes died quickly and the land stilled.

“What the hell?” he said.

“Earthquake,” she said. “We get them now and again.”

He stood and smiled with faint reassurance. “The witching hour is upon us. Let’s start back. I can see pretty well in the dark.”

They inched along the path, and gradually were able to discern just enough of the landscape to make out the road and approach the bridge.

“You’ve probably already written a story about this while we walked down the hill,” she said.

“Of course,” he said. “Although, I don’t have an ending.”

She took his hand and led him onward.

The shadowy lines of the bridge materialized amid the bank of fog that boiled up from the river. As they stepped onto the partitioned walkway, his heart began to drum. He imagined the previous tremor had sheared the bridge in twain and that in a few more paces he’d swing his foot over murky nothingness and fall. There wouldn’t be a cold river awaiting his plunge; only the endless void between stars.

Behind them and on a steep grade in the road, a pair of headlights clicked on and pierced the gloom. He understood this was the panel van he’d seen cruising town. He knew with absolute infallibility *who* inhabited the idling vehicle and *what* they intended to do with their ropes and machetes and plastic bags. The dog, or wolf, howled again. Its cry bounced from the fog and could’ve originated anywhere.

She turned to him and her expression was hidden. “We’re not going to die tonight. I promise.” Then she released him and stepped backward and

vanished. Somewhere in the town ahead, a distant solitary porch light winked into existence.

“What about your sense of impending doom?”

“Melted away by the power of love. Come on.”

A pair of red eyes flashed low to the ground and were gone. If they’d ever been.

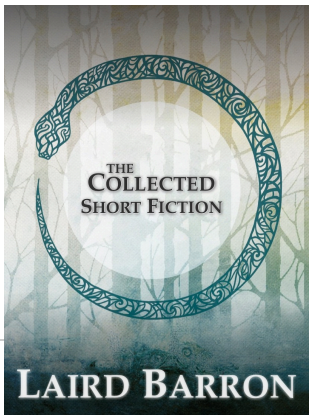
“I felt afraid,” he said, meaning it in every sense of the phrase.

“We’re not going to die. Trust me, trust me.” Her voice was faint and fading. She laughed a ghostly laugh. “Probably something worse.”

He waited for a time, standing on the bridge, listening to the night and preparing for the inevitable. But nothing happened.

In a while he squared his shoulders and began to walk toward the light that flickered and receded with each heartbeat.

Black Dog



This version taken from *Swift to Chase*, 2016
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While watching the door he found himself humming "Love Will Tear Us Apart" under his breath.

She walked into the restaurant two minutes late. She dusted cigarette ashes off the sleeve of her coat and hugged him and accepted the rose he'd brought. First date and the rose was the nicest of the bunch, wrapped in baby's breath and pink tissue paper. He'd destroyed some other pretty nice flowers to get this sucker out of the refrigerated cabinet at the store. He'd also gotten stabbed by a thorn and it made him wonder if this might be a sign from whatever gods watch over the chariot races of the Hippodrome of Romance.

They sat across from one another for a few moments without speaking. Her eyes were brown. No, her eyes were green. The glow from the lamps changed them moment by moment. Looking into their depths disoriented him as if the building might be rotating upon the crest of a wave. He noticed two things: the top button of her blouse was undone and his collar felt a little tight. Also, the room seemed warm. He gulped some ice water, but the ice had melted and the water went down his throat like blood.

"Your eyes change color," she said.

"I get lizard eye. When I'm tired. Or in a mood."

"In the mood?"

"*A* mood."

She raised her brow and tried her water. Her throat moved and he regarded the patterns in the canopy overhanging the walkway.

Dusk was upon the world again. It was All Hallows Eve. The sky glowed as softly as the belly of a wine bottle. Street lights and lights in shop fronts were flickering to life along the slope of the avenue. The breeze through an open window tasted of wildflowers and moss and dying leaves. Her scent was lilac in his nose.

He'd been drinking. Scotch on the rocks. Probably not enough of it, though. When she removed her coat, he noted that the flesh of her arms was bruised purple. He breathed in the smell of her and observed how her skin shone, how her breast rose and fell, how her lips curved enigmatically, and nope, definitely not enough with the drinking for him.

"Wasn't something there a minute ago?" She pointed to the sidewalk and the sandwich board sign that advertised the restaurant.

"A big fucking black dog," he said. He'd seen the dog all right—huge and shaggy, black as the heart of night. Foam curdled its muzzle. Its tongue had lolled as it grinned at him from where it reclined at the foot of the sign. "Red eyes. Kinda spooky."

"Red eyes like in a photograph, or red eyes like the wolves in a Disney cartoon?"

"Red eyes like a vampire in a motherfucking Hammer flick." Wow; *fucking*, then *motherfucking*, no less, and in under the first twenty seconds. A personal best. He finished his scotch and loosened his collar and stared at the patch of sidewalk where the enormous black dog had lain moments ago. Had there been a leash? A master? He couldn't picture the scene anymore. He remembered the last of the sunlight in its eyes, however. Those eyes were suddenly coals ignited by a breath, and its wide, friendly smile hinted at a sort of knowingness.

"That's not good," she said.

"It's gone now. I've got no problem with dogs. Seemed friendly. Odd, is all."

"No, no, it's bad luck. Or, wait. Not bad luck—a bad omen. To see the black hound means curtains for you or someone close to you."

"Oh. Where do you get that?"

“Britain. A legend from over there. My dad went and lived on the moors when he graduated from school. He photographed mounds and menhirs, pillaged tombs. Et cetera.”

“He’s an archeologist?”

“Dad?” She laughed. Soft and lovely. “Hell no.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s dead.”

“May I have another?” He quickly raised his empty glass to the passing server. “I’m sorry.”

“Makes one of us.”

“Ma’am, a double on that scotch, eh?” Yeah, his collar kept cinching in like a noose.

“What about you?” She studied him now. Focused upon him with an intensity that caused his heart to flutter.

“My old man is alive and well and living in Lincoln, Montana. He races huskies. We don’t talk.”

“Lucky you.”

“Trust me, it ain’t luck. Years and years of effort.”

“Any kids? Wife? Girlfriend?”

“One dog, an ex, my work. Back at you.”

“A Cavalier King Charles Spaniel. I’ve never been married. What kind of dog is yours?”

“A pit bull. I rescued her. She’s sweet and gentle.”

She nodded. “That’s what everybody says right before their darling takes off an arm.”

“Don’t care for them, eh?”

“I had a bad experience. Where did you grow up?”

“Alaska,” he said. “My dad was a hunter.”

“Yes… and so the huskies. I think it’s cruel to put a harness on an animal.”

“How about a saddle?”

“Ha. Screw the Kentucky Derby. Horse racing should be abolished. Don’t you agree?”

“Nice weather, isn’t it?” He studied his place setting.

“Totally. I spent the day looking at houses for my mom. She’s in Florida.”

“She’s moving back north. How nice for you.”

“Nah. She just likes to shop online. Takes one of those video tours and convinces me to see the joint in person and report. She put in a bid on a place last month and then cancelled it. Decided the staircase was too narrow to lug her king sized bed up to the second floor. Jesus Christ. No way she’s coming back to New York. She’d freeze.”

“Why does she send you around to recon then?”

“She’s a sweet old bird. Who the hell knows why she does what she does?”

The server came with another scotch for him and more ice water for her. They ordered dinner. She requested noodles and something else. He chose the fried rice without giving a damn.

“You’re divorced, huh? What went wrong?”

“I was a neglectful bastard.”

“Really? You seem different.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Good.”

“Are you seeing anyone?” he said because she’d deflected the question earlier. It seemed impossible that she wasn’t. For the love of God, look at her. He’d already decided not to involve himself in any triangles, had resolved to get up and walk out depending upon the answer. A brief, early sting was easiest in his estimation.

“Am I seeing anyone… Huh. Two months ago, my boyfriend left me for his ex. That one broke my heart.” She glanced at her hands, toying with the rings, then swung back to meet his gaze. “At the moment it’s you, only you.”

He still wasn’t certain whether that was a yes or a no. Another sip, another moment spent lingering upon the lines of her jaw and neck, the sweep of

her clavicle, and the strength to move drained from him. He wished like hell that he enjoyed mysteries.

What did he know, then? She was in her thirties. She clerked at the library. She was a karate player at a local school. That's where they'd first met a couple of years back. He'd flown into town to visit friends, a whistle-stop before his book signing at a lit bar in the city. His friends, who also attended the school, dragged him down to the dojo to meet the gang. She arrived on the scene, knotting her second degree black belt and wham, he was smitten. He'd been married at the time, so he shook her hand and smiled and ignored the sparks that shot out of their fingers and into each other.

A lot had changed in three years. But not her.

His pulse thrilled and that worried him. Married forever and a day, then suddenly alone again, and absorbed in his writing, he'd almost forgotten the rush that accompanied the new and the unknown. He felt a curious and unwelcome sense of vulnerability that reminded him of his youth, of plowing headlong into a towering blizzard. Since the divorce he'd spoken to many women. Here was the first one to get his heart beating faster.

So, he tasted his drink and gloomily acknowledged that the tremor in his hand, the faint sickness in his soul, meant she was getting under his skin in a big way. He sighed and smiled at her and vowed, for the umpteenth time so far, not to say anything stupid, or misanthropic, or inane.

The angel on his shoulder laughed and laughed at that one.

Full darkness arrived. They migrated outdoors.

She took a pack of Camel No. 9s from her coat and lighted one. She smoked and watched him from the corner of her eye. He stood on the sidewalk and breathed heavily. He felt as winded as a prizefighter who'd survived into the later rounds. A cold breeze dried the sweat on his brow. The moon drifted over the black curve of the horizon. Full and radiant as a searchlight, the moon smoldered in the void, frozen as close to them as it would be for another million years.

The couple moved on after a while, stepping through bands of shadow cast by the interlaced branches of lithe potted magnolias and oaks. Many of the

shops were locking up. The watchmaker and the baker hunched behind cold display cases, counting tills. A girl in an apron pushed a broom and smiled wistfully. Small groups of college kids drifted between the soft neon oases of bars and restaurants. There were fairy wings, a toga, some glitter and face paint, but few had bothered to get dressed for Halloween. A man played a violin in a second floor window over a darkened bookstore. The musician was a brawny, shirtless lad. Sweat wisped from his glistening shoulders. He nodded gravely and sawed with vigor as they passed.

"Love it," she said. "My brother plays the cello. Damned good. Make you cry." Her shoulder bumped his. "Ah, now check it. This used to be a swell art gallery." She indicated a deserted shop front. The placard promised the impending advent of a chain Irish pub. "Alas, the poor Krams. I knew them, Horatio. Lived here their entire lives, had local artists and poets in all the time. Robert Creeley read here, once. *The* Robert fucking Creeley. Nobody wants art, though. Nobody wants poetry. What they want is another bloody pub the same as every other cookie cutter pub. I hear the Irish mob had a hand in running my friends out."

"Where'd the owners go?" he said, thanking God she'd taken the pressure off him by cursing. He put his hands into his pockets, then took them out again. He wished he'd remembered to bring gum. His bum knee hurt. A panel van rolled by, slow as a shark on the cruise. Its plates were splattered in black mud.

"Yonder." She waved in the direction of the Catskills.

"That reminds me. There are caves nearby."

"Caves everywhere around these parts."

"Something about the mafia or Prohibition I overheard. Maybe the War of Independence. My memory is shot."

"Hm. There's also the Iron Mountain facility. They store all kinds of documents in some limestone caves in Rosendale. Hush-hush stuff."

"Aha." He watched the van's taillights dwindle. "I also heard some murders happened here in town. Gruesome was the word."

"Sure. Those are still going on, though. Have been since the '70s. Cops never bagged anybody. Never will."

“Serial killer?”

She stopped. Her face was luminous as if animated by the prospect of blood. He fell in love a little bit, then and there. “Uh, huh. Creepo snatches hikers and joggers and street people. Leaves them in the woods. Maybe seven, eight years ago, a Boy Scout troop stumbled upon eleven decomposed corpses in a cavern along the Wallkill. What kinda merit badge do you get for that, I wonder?”

“Hold up a sec. The ’70s? Forty years, give or take. That seems like a long time for one guy to be about this sort of business.”

“I bet it’s a family thing,” she said. “Pop passes it down to the eldest son the way tradesmen did it during the agrarian era. Some kind of whacked traditionalist.”

“Lurid as lurid can be, yet, it never made the national news…”

“It made the news. Twenty-four-hour cycle is the problem. Today it’s a mass grave, tomorrow it’s back to celebrity meltdowns and the peccadilloes of the rich and the beautiful.”

He stared at the moon and thought about her explanation.

“Are you here to research the case?” she said.

“No. My book is about an ornithologist. He dies in a valley in the mountains. Birds eat him.”

“Ah, you’re researching birds.”

“I’m here for you.”

Her turn to scrutinize the moon and not say anything.

They kept on. Residential houses now—old, Gothic models that he’d noticed were common here in the Hudson Valley. Iron fences and lush, neglected yards. Televisions flickered blue in certain windows, projecting phantom lovemaking, train wrecks, explosions, murder. Fires flickered inside jack o’ lanterns. Lawn gnomes crouched with feral aspects in the long, wet grass.

He loved how she walked. Somewhere between a sway and a shuffle, arms swinging loose, head turning on a swivel in the manner of every professional fighter he’d ever known. She possessed a sort of animal grace

that wasn't conscious of itself, but alert to everything occurring within its environment. Heat emanated from her in waves.

He shivered. "Do you go armed, considering the situation?"

"Yeah, sometimes. When I'm not sure of where I'm headed or who I'm meeting. Then I carry a blade."

"Got it on you now?"

"Nope." She kind of smiled and patted his arm. "Didn't figure I needed it. Besides, *I'm* a weapon. You're safe as houses with me."

"I'm sure."

"Ask me where I got the knife."

"The knife you should be packing, but aren't?"

"Ha-ha, I did carry it this afternoon when I met the realtor."

"Okay. Where did you get the knife?"

"From the Sneaky Fucking Russian."

"Let me guess—he's a karate guy."

She grinned. "Right on. Speaking of the mob, this dude's got the swagger. Broken nose and gin blossoms, wears heavy jewelry and a track suit. Thick accent. Eyes like pennies. A scowl mean enough to make a Spetsnaz drop his AK. Kinda skulks around. He asked me out about a hundred times when he arrived at the dojo. He got more and more belligerent about the whole thing. Finally, he exploded and demanded to know what was wrong with me that I wouldn't date him. Shouting and stomping his foot, the whole routine. I told him this was unacceptable behavior and to piss off before he got kicked out onto the street. Very tedious."

"Ah, an old school Eastern gentleman. I like those guys all right."

"Do you?"

"Yeah. They tend to be tough, loyal, no nonsense types. I got a soft spot for that. He'd probably make a great boyfriend after you slap him around a little."

"Sure, it isn't you he's trying to feel up when you're sparring."

"Fair enough. Does he know you call him the Sneaky Fucking Russian?"

She snorted and laughed. “Uh, no. Are you going to listen to the rest of the story? I’m not finished.”

“Tell me.”

“So, right. A couple of months go by. The Sneaky Fucking Russian keeps training, but he avoids me like the plague. Won’t so much as glance in my direction. One night he comes over to me with flowers and a small box wrapped in a bow. I’m thinking, oh shit, here we go again, but he holds up his hand and says, no, no, I was wrong to speak to you in that manner. You are strong American woman and I am the dirt under your shoes. I am not fit to kiss your foot. Then he gives me the box…”

“Thus the knife.”

“Yep!”

“What kind is it?”

She shrugged. “What do you mean? It’s a knife.”

“I mean is it a Randall, a Gerber, a Ka-Bar…?”

“Oh. Well, I don’t know. It folds.”

“You should get a fixed blade and keep it on you.”

“Thanks, Dad. I told you, I’m a weapon.” She was quiet for a long moment. “Death doesn’t frighten me. I’ve died plenty of times.”

“How does that work?” He squeezed her hand and let it go. “You feel warm enough.”

“*Everybody* has died. When I was six I went sledding and hit a concrete retaining wall under the snow. Felt my neck crack and everything faded to white. When the world came back into focus I was right as rain, but…”

“I understand,” he said. The booze made him a bit giddy. He remembered a long ago storm on Norton Sound, the rasp of diamond-bright snow scouring the ice, a universe of white; his hands were blurred shadows groping for purchase, and all around him, inside him, a constant dull roar. “And for a few hours after you came to, everything was in too sharp focus. Everything was too real.”

“Yes! Too shiny, too present. I felt like a ghost floating through a world that had materialized to accommodate me. By the next day I’d forgotten.

Sometimes it comes back when I dream, or at odd moments."

"Like tonight."

"Maybe a little." She gave him a sidelong glance. Her eyes were ringed like a raccoon's and they shone with wary innocence. "The portal opens on All Hallows. Tonight is the night to do a séance or summon a spirit, if that's what floats your boat. All possibilities are viable."

"How many times has it happened? The return from the dead bit?"

"Three. You?"

He considered. "Eleven or twelve."

"Jeez, dude! What the hell were you doing before you started writing?"

"Misspending my youth. Drinking, fighting, whoring around. Tramping across ice packs and climbing mountains. The usual for where I grew up."

"Can't leave it there. Tell me a story."

"Oh, how about I do that on our next date? Give you something to look forward to."

"What makes you think there's going to be another date?" She smiled. "Come along, now."

"I drowned once when I was a kid," he said. "Fell in the creek. Dad had to press the water out of my lungs and get me going again. Another time, very late in the winter, I was training a string of huskies on the Susitna River. The ice gave way under my sled and I went into the black water as deep as my chest before the team somehow dragged me free. There wasn't any bottom to that river. That current is strong and it'll suck you under. Basically a miracle I survived. Got shanked in a bar fight in Dutch Harbor. A deckhand stuck me with a big ass filet knife. Except that's not quite what happened—damned if the point didn't bounce off my chest. Not even a bruise, but I saw my life go pouring out onto the sawdust floor anyhow. There you go. Three stories for the price of one."

She chewed her thumbnail and kept walking, half a stride ahead. She said, "I'm a bitch after you get to know me."

"How many dates in is that, would you say?"

“Usually halfway through the first one. I like my space. Everything tends to be about me, me, me.”

“Everything?”

“I’m all I’ve got.”

“You’ve been fucked over. That’s coming through loud and clear.”

“With a vengeance,” she said.

“Okay,” he said.

“Thought it might be useful information. I’d hate to disappoint you down the road.”

“That doesn’t sound so selfish.”

“I like to make people smile, but I hate them too. Ah, the essential dichotomy of me. It might drive you crazy. You’ll love me, but you’ll be a mad dog.”

He chuckled. “The damage was done long before we met. Are you happy?”

“I’m happy and I’m never bored. I’ve always thought I was meant for great things. But, all that happens is I keep getting older.”

“You’re in a rut. Press your face to the grindstone and that’s all you can see. Same friends, same colleagues, same scenery. The years roll over into one another. Happiness and misery become intertwined.”

“I like my rut,” she said.

“People always think they do. It’s either that or slit your wrists.”

Street lights stretched farther and farther apart. The night deepened. They came to a bridge with rusty girders. The water below gleamed in moonlit streaks.

“I’ve lived in this town for twenty years and never walked across this bridge,” she said.

“Tonight is the night?” he said. “For séances and a bridge crossing?”

“Yeah. Watch out for the Hessian.” She pulled her collar tight and winked.

He counted sixty-six steps, measuring each stride with the precision his father, a Marine, had instilled within him. Being slightly drunk concentrated his mind, oddly enough. Seventy-six steps saw them atop a gravel embankment that functioned as a turnout for cars. A heavily trodden path began a yard off the white line of the road and immediately forked. One path descended to the river; the other climbed a hillock toward a copse of gaunt trees and a jumble of rocks. She plucked his sleeve and led the way upward.

The largest, flattest stone shone white. She brushed aside a litter of dead leaves and primly seated herself upon its surface and beckoned him. For a time they sat, shoulder to shoulder; she smoking, he watching the lights of the town and the headlights sparkling along the road. The wind rose in brief gusts and branches moaned in the surrounding woods.

"This is romantic," he said, putting his arm around her. She didn't move one way or another.

"There was a grove here once," she said. "During colonial times those white settlers who followed the Old Gods cultivated this hillside, planted oak and sage and conducted druidic rituals. Naturally, the Christians eventually squashed them. Hanged the 'witches' from the trees, or drowned them in the river. An inquisitor razed the grove to ash and this stone became known as the White Spot."

He raised his head to examine the few scraggly trees that poked from the dense soil, claws raking free of a grave. "Nothing good grows here, I take it."

"Stunted, emaciated shadows of the grand oaks of days gone by. The ground is cursed, but I come here all the same. I feel drawn like a flake of metal hurtling toward a giant magnet. There's a current in the earth, a conduit. It speaks to my blood."

The moon floated across the near pane of sky, visibly traveling like a golden sail on the night sea. She inclined her head toward him and they gazed into each other's eyes. A charge arced from her and into him. His vision doubled. He beheld himself kneeling before her naked form, lips pressed to her sweet hip while the great and deathly blizzard that nearly killed him once raged against the walls of a landlocked cabin. He had the

sense of the moon plunging toward the earth, the dissolution of himself within the following shockwave. As he dissolved, the lilac taste of her was the last artifact of his being to go into that good night. A dog or a wolf howled the howl of death.

She touched his neck and her hand was cool. She said, “What’s wrong?”

“Must be the Great Conjunction, or too heavy on the booze,” he said, shuddering free of the illusion.

“No conjunctions tonight. Plenty of single malt, though.” She laughed and kneaded his arm. Her fingers were very strong.

“I like your bruises,” he said. “Sexy as hell.”

“You are a little nuts, aren’t you?” she said and kissed him on the mouth. She was sweet with lip gloss and smoke and spearmint gum.

His toes curled. He thought of the Stevens poem about the wind in the hemlocks and the tails of the peacocks and the dead leaves turning in the fire as the planets aligned and turned outside the window. Fear and exultation turned within him. The wind and the cold in his chest receded, growling.

She separated from him slightly and said, “*And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.*” She licked her lips. “Sometimes I can read minds. Ever since that sledding accident.”

He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. “Precognition. Usually during dreams, but occasionally when I’m walking down the street or chatting on the phone… Zaps me like a bolt from the blue. Too unpredictable or else I’d hop a plane to Vegas and rake it in. Eerie, though.”

“That explains your perspicacity.”

He kissed her again.

Finally, she said, “All night I’ve had a feeling of impending doom.”

“I’d say everything has turned up aces so far.”

“Maybe, maybe. Can’t last. Romance with me is fraught with peril. Consider yourself duly warned.”

Clouds rolled across the stars and covered the moon.

“Hm, the gods agree,” he said noticing the abrupt and precipitous chill that slithered over his flesh and into his bones. He felt her breath against his face, but could barely see the shine of her eyes.

She trembled and tightened her grip on his arms. “All the lights are out. Everywhere.”

The chill intensified as he realized that she was indeed correct. While they’d been distracted, a vast, cosmic hand had erased the town with a sweep of darkness. Fog and cloud covered the world. The rock vibrated beneath them and small stones cascaded away toward the water. In the near distance a metallic shriek rent the silence. Its echoes died quickly and the land stilled.

“What the hell?” he said.

“Earthquake,” she said. “We get them now and again.”

He stood and smiled with faint reassurance. “The witching hour is upon us. Let’s start back. I can see pretty well in the dark.”

They inched along the path, and gradually were able to discern enough of the landscape to make the road and approach the bridge.

“You’ve probably already written a story about this while we walked down the hill,” she said.

“Of course,” he said. “Although, I don’t have an ending.”

She took his hand and led him onward.

The shadowy lines of the bridge materialized amid the bank of fog that boiled up from the river. As they stepped onto the partitioned walkway, his heart began to drum. He imagined the previous tremor had sheared the bridge in twain and that in a few more paces he’d swing his foot over murky nothingness and fall. There wouldn’t be a cold river awaiting his plunge; only the endless void between stars.

Behind them and on a steep grade in the road, a pair of headlights clicked on and pierced the gloom. He understood this was the panel van he’d seen cruising town. He knew with absolute infallibility *who* inhabited the idling vehicle and *what* they intended to do with their ropes and machetes and plastic bags. The dog, or wolf, howled again. Its cry bounced from the fog and could’ve originated anywhere.

She turned to him and her expression was hidden. “We’re not going to die tonight. I promise.” Then she released him and stepped backward and vanished. Somewhere in the town ahead, a distant solitary porch light winked into existence.

“What about your sense of impending doom?”

“Melted away by the power of love. Come on.”

A pair of red eyes flashed low to the ground and were gone. If they’d ever been.

“I felt afraid,” he said, meaning it in every sense of the phrase.

“We’re not going to die. Trust me, trust me.” Her voice was faint and fading. She laughed a ghostly laugh. “Probably something worse.”

He waited for a time, listening to the night and preparing for the inevitable. But nothing happened. In a while he squared his shoulders and began to walk toward the light that flickered and receded with each heartbeat.

Ardor

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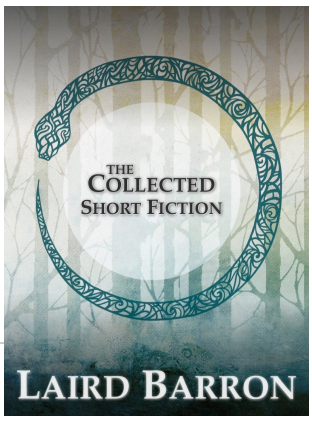


—Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, February 9, 1975

What is it Pilot John says right before we drop from the sky?

Where is Molly's body? No, that's my own voice haunting me on account of someone else's ghost, someone else's guilt.

The pilot's head inclines to the left, slick as any disco floor pro. He gasps and takes the good Lord's name in vain. There's a quality of terror in the sharp inhalation that precedes this utterance. There's rapture in the utterance itself. His words are distorted by electronic interference through the headset. The snarl of a lynx wanting its fill of guts.

Obligingly, the world rolls over and shows its belly—

—I come to after the crash and call Conway's name the way I sometimes do upon surfacing from a nightmare. In this nightmare he is kissing me, but his left eye is gone and I can see daylight shining all the way through his skull. He says hot into my mouth, *This wound won't close.*

Now, I'm awake and alive. Hell of a surprise, the being alive part.

Snow trickles down through a hole in the fuselage and crystallizes in my lashes and beard. The last of the daylight trickles through the hole too and the world around me resolves into soft focus. Buckets of white light saturate everything until it's all ghostly and delicate. I'm strapped into the far back seat of the Beaver. I close my eyes again and recall low mountains rising on our left and the shadow of the plane descending toward an ice sheet that seems to stretch unto the end of creation.

Our particular jag of beach lies south of Quinhagak, not that that helps. In the summer, this is a vast circulatory system of bogs and streams on the edge of the Bering Sea. Ptarmigan and wolves, bears and fish dwell here,

feast upon one another here. In the winter, it's one of God's abandoned drawing slates. The temperature is around negative thirty Fahrenheit. That's cold, my babies. The mercury will only keep dropping.

"Conway's in Seattle," Parker says. "He's safe. You're safe. Who's your favorite football team?" His breath is minty. He thinks I'm slipping away when I'm actually slipping *back* into the world. Sweet kid. Handsome, too. Life is gonna wreck him. That's funny and I chuckle. He grips my shoulder. His mittens are blue and white to match the stripes on the plane. "C'mon Sam, stay with me. Who'd you root for in the Super Bowl? The Vikings? I bet you're a Vikings man. My cousin met Fran Tarkenton, says he's a gem. Can't throw a spiral, but a hell of a quarterback anyhow."

"Cowboys fan." I'm remarkably calm, despite this instinctive urge to smack the condescension from him. He means well. His eyes are so blue. Conway's are green and green is my favorite color, so I'm safe as Parker keeps saying.

"The Cowboys! No kidding? Seattle doesn't have a club. One more year, right?"

"Dad is from Galveston." I haven't thought about my father in an age, much less acknowledged him aloud. Could be a concussion.

"Where's your accent? You don't have an accent."

"Dad does. Classic drawl." I hesitate. My tongue is dry. Goddamned climate. "How are the other guys?" The other guys being Pilot John, regional historian Maddox, and our wilderness guide extraordinaire Moses.

"Don't worry about them. Everybody's A-OK. Let's see if we can get you outta here. Gonna be dark any minute now. Moses thinks we need to be somewhere else before then."

His voice is too cheerful. I'm convinced he's lying about everyone being all right. Then I catch a glimpse of Pilot John slumped at the controls, his anorak splashed red. His posture is awkward, inanimate—he's a goner for certain. The engine has to be sitting on his legs. Snapped matchsticks, most definitely. The windshield blasted inward to cover him in rhinestones. I lack the strength to utter recriminations. Abrupt stabs of pain in my lower back suggest my body is coming out of shock. It isn't happy.

Parker strips free of a mitten and there are pills in the palm of his hand. He feeds me the pills.

I clear my throat and say, “Somebody will be along. The posse can’t be far.” Lord, the aspirin is bitter. A slug of lukewarm coffee from Parker’s thermos helps. “John got a Mayday out, didn’t he?” But what I recall is John with both hands on the wheel while the rest of us yell and pray. Nobody touches the radio in the eight or so seconds before it all goes black. “Sonofabitch. Tell me it’s working.” I know it’s not working, though. The radio was smashed on impact along with Pilot John’s body. That’s how this tragedy is unfolding, isn’t it? After making a career of fucking over others, finally we are the ones getting the screw job. O. Henry or Hitchcock should be on the case.

Parker says, “I wonder if you can walk.”

While he struggles to extricate me from the ruins of the plane, I’m thinking not only is it a damned shame Pilot John failed to transmit a Mayday, he didn’t even file a flight plan that accounts for our detour to this wasteland of tundra and ice. We’re at least two hours southwest of the original destination. That potentially lethal blunder is on me. I’d gotten greedy and tried to squeeze in an unscheduled stop. Thanks to me we are all the way up shit creek.

A storm is moving in off the sea. Blizzard conditions will sock in search and rescue craft at Bethel. That means three, possibly four days of roughing it for us. If we’re lucky. How lucky we are remains to be seen.

I cough on the raw taste of smoke.

“Heck.” Parker glances over his shoulder. “Guess she’s on fire.”

Yes, Virginia, we’re in trouble—

—Professor Gander invited me to lunch at the Swan Club in Ballard and laid it all on the table. Entrusted me with a withered valise stuffed with documents and old-timey photos. He endeavored to explain their significance through suggestion and innuendo. Two things I dislike unless we’re talking romance, which we weren’t. I disguised my fascination with a yawn.

He lighted a cigarette and set it in the ashtray without taking a drag first. “The papers were written by R. M. Bluefield, allegedly a mysterious Victorian fellow Stoker based the Renfield character upon. Bluefield was an avowed mystic, a fascination he acquired abroad in Eastern Europe and Asia. He possessed training in medicine, also from his world travels. He was obsessed with the concept of immortality, but then, so were many others of that era. His particular interest lay in the notion that it might be obtained through certain blood rites or the consumption of animal organs. Stoker, it is thought, perused the fellow’s papers and mocked Mr. Bluefield’s eccentricity.

“The journals changed hands, most recently belonging to an actor from the 1950s and ’60s named Ralph Smyth. Where *he* acquired them is a matter of conjecture, although it’s of scant consequence. For our purposes, we simply need to locate Smyth himself.”

“Ah, the royal we. There’s a booster, I presume. Got to love those guys. Richer than rich if he’s going through you.”

“Yes, Mr. Cope. I represent a patron. One with very deep pockets.”

“God love ’em. And what does this patron want with Smyth?”

“You will locate him and ask a single question. Return with his answer, whatever that may be.”

“A question?”

“One question. I’ll even write it down for you.” He produced a fancy pen and indeed did write it on a coaster. He also wrote his home address and a set of numbers that represented the payment on offer. A nice plump round figure, to be sure.

I lingered over the coaster and then put it in my pocket. “This is a little weird, professor. Not exactly my normal brief, so to speak. I take it this Smyth character is missing, or else you’d go ask him yourself.”

“It is possible the fellow’s dead, although we suspect he’s very much alive. In hiding, we think. Took a powder into the Alaskan wilderness during the spring of 1967. There are more recent accounts, multiple sightings of a man matching Smyth’s description.”

“Seven years is a long time to be on the lam. The cops want him?”

“The authorities don’t possess evidence to implicate him in any nefarious dealings, such as the disappearance of my patron’s daughter. My patron suspects otherwise, naturally. That’s where you come in.”

“Maybe Smyth’s got an aversion to overly aggressive film buffs.” I smiled, but he didn’t seem amused. “So, I’m going to put together a team and fly all over the ass end of Alaska, hunting for some guy basically nobody’s ever heard of…”

“Ralph Smyth, Ralph Smyth, surely you recall…” Professor Gander buffed his signet ring and waited for the light to dawn in my presumably Neanderthal brain. Fucker wore a cardigan and rimless glasses. He’d gone prematurely white like Warhol.

“Surely I do not.” I took a gulp of Redbreast. Glass number three. I’m not a heavy drinker, but suffering the good professor required extreme measures.

“A poor man’s Lon Chaney who eked a career from getting violently offed in a dozen Hammer films. What he’s famous for, however—”

“Nothing, apparently,” I said, a teensy bit drunk already.

Gander bared his mismatched and silver-capped teeth. He wanted a taste of my blood, it could be assumed. He said, “Bravo, Cope. The man is famous for nothing. What he’s *infamous* for is his final role in a French Canadian art film. *Ardor*. An exceedingly liberal interpretation of *Dracula*. Ten years ago this spring, *Ardor* premiered at a Quebec festival, then sank into obscurity. It is reviled by critics and forgotten by the public. Have you seen it? Amazing work.”

“Oh, by art, you mean smut, eh? I dig.”

“Yes, a pornographic movie. Rated triple-X for sex and violence. A notorious piece of cinema, even by genre standards. Banned in many countries. Only a few copies rumored to survive, et cetera, et cetera.”

“I’m sorry I missed this one. A porno retelling of *Dracula*. What will they think of next?”

“The forces at work in the world are endlessly inventive. Artistic autocoprophagy is here to stay.”

I studied him through the haze of his untouched cigarette, preferring not to dignify his comment with a response. I made a mental note to look up

autocoprophagy.

He said, “Why don’t you come by my place tonight and I’ll show you the film? I’ve got a bootleg reel. A few colleagues and some friends of the university will be in attendance. You can mingle, make new acquaintances. A fellow in your line can always use new connections, and a better class of them, too.”

“You and your cronies going to gather around the campfire to watch a stag flick, huh?” I said. “A banned stag flick. That’s a relief. I prefer the company of miscreants.”

“There’s another item we’ll need to discuss,” he said. “The client is a dear friend of mine. That’s why he’s come to me in the wake of the law’s failure to rectify his concerns. Nonetheless, I’ve reason to believe Smyth went to Alaska on a specific mission. He’s a bibliophile and an antiquarian. His home, which he abandoned, was stuffed with extraordinary… items, shall we say? By all means extract the information my patron requires, but if you can bring home any significant papers or relics, or lacking that, photographic evidence of said, you’ll be generously compensated.”

“Well, in that case, here’s another coaster.”—

—I drove over to the professor’s house around nine. Late enough that people would’ve settled in, but before any craziness had gotten started, or so I hoped. Gander struck me as a buttoned-down freak.

The address he’d scribbled on a coaster led me to an old mansion in the U-District, set back from the street. Parking is hell in the U, so I left the car in a likely spot and walked three blocks. The windows were dark and I wondered if it was the right place until Gander’s housemaid answered the bell and greeted me by name. More of a gasped epithet, really. Her face was pale. She held a candle in an ornamental bowl.

The maid led me to a study eerily illuminated by a silver screen on the far wall. She fled. I got the impression of antique furniture and lots of bookcases. A throng of silhouettes was backlighted by the screen. I whiffed cherry pipe smoke and fancy cologne, a hint of marijuana.

A film played for this crowd of rustling shadows. Its frames jumped, were poorly spliced; the scenes were muddy and marred by frequent cigarette burns; the color flickered. Tiny subtitles and a strange, scratchy orchestral

symphony accompanied the grunts and cries of the actors, all a half-beat offset from the action itself. Somebody was fucking somebody. Somebody was murdering somebody. Cocks everywhere, thrusting into every opening. A guillotine blade dropped through the neck of a devil clown. Gore splashed the thirteen dancing brides of Dracula and flecked the camera lens. Darkness flooded in. For an instant the gallery dissolved and I became dislocated, a bullet shot into the vacuum of deep space.

The lights came up while the film kept running. Someone said, “Jesus Christ!”

I beheld a congregation of the crème de la crème of UW faculty; fifteen or so middle-aged dudes in sweaters and slacks, drinks and smokes in hand, all of them sniffing in my direction like moles. The departments of anthropology, psychiatry, and literature were well represented.

Horror stretched Gander’s face in all kinds of unpleasant directions. “What are you doing here?” he said. He gestured as if to ward away an evil spirit. “What are you doing here? You can’t be here.”

I wanted to tell him to piss off, he’d invited me, but I couldn’t speak. There was too much blood in my mouth. I was naked and covered in blood. I extended my arms like the Vitruvian Man and the room rotated. Centrifugal force pinned me in place. On the screen, washed out, yet immense and wicked, naked Dracula embraced naked Renfield and crushed the life from him. The camera zoomed in on Renfield’s glazed eye, penetrated the iris into the secondary universe, the anti-reality. It was snowing there, in hell. I was in there, in hell, in the snow, waving to myself.

A white glow ignited on my left where the doorway to the long hall should’ve hung. Instead, an ice field bloomed through a porthole. So bright, so beautiful, filling up my brain with fog—

—The team assembled at the Bull Moose Diner in downtown Bethel, Alaska to plot a final sequence of site flyovers. Alaska is a big place. Nonetheless, we were running out of places to search for our quarry. If I couldn’t find Smyth in the next few days, that might be curtains for the expedition.

Frankly, the frigid Alaskan winter wasn’t doing my mood any favors. Relocating to western Washington for a vacation didn’t sound half bad. I

could take Conway to Lake Crescent for a romantic idyll, or hiking along Hurricane Ridge. Or maybe we'd hole up at my house and drink wine and watch the rain hit the windows.

Is retrieving the bones of a person treasure hunting? Or would you perhaps like to call it grave robbing? Conway posed this question with a smile—he could afford to smile because he didn't know the half of what I did for a living. That was the last time I'd seen him in the flesh. He'd spent the night at my place on Queen Anne Hill. The next morning would find me aboard a jet to Anchorage. He lived across town in North Gate; sold insurance to corporations. The job took him out of my life about as often as mine took me out of his. We'd been lovers for three years. I'm tallish and homely; he's shorter and handsome enough to model if he wanted. He's a man of his word and I'm shifty as they come. The arrangement worked, barely.

Grave robbing? Maybe Conway had it right. Over the past decade I'd flown thrice around the world in the service of numerous scholarly profiteers of the exact same mold as Professor Gander and his ilk. Missions frequently revolved around wresting artifacts of historical significance from the locals, or better yet, absconding with said relics before the locals even suspected chicanery was in the offing. Sometimes, this job being an example, I was sent to retrieve a real live person, or extract information from said. You just never knew. My chief talents? A willingness to follow orders and endure a not inconsiderable measure of privation and hardship along the way. I don't balk at getting my hands dirty. Runs in the family. Granddad shot people for the Irish mob back in the Roaring Twenties; made an art of it, or so the legends go. I'm not even close to being that kind of a hard case, just sufficiently mean to get matters across when it's called for.

The future would take care of itself. Meanwhile, here I sat in Bethel with a string to play out: four sites within striking distance of the village. Gold Rush mining camps abandoned since World War II, except for infrequent visits by tourists, researchers, and ne'er-do-wells. That last was us. My comrades were more inclined to the business of looting and pillaging native artifacts under the guise of academic inquiry.

"A sentient being isn't an artifact separate from the universe," said Moses as he counted out bills for the waiter. None of us had the first clue who he was speaking to. "Sentient beings are the sensors of the universe, its nerve

endings. A colony of ants, a flock of geese, a city-state, are the places where enough sensors amass and the universe becomes self-aware.” He paused with a scowl. “Somebody needs to kick in another two bucks.”

That was doubtless Maddox who’d skimped on the tip. I tossed a five spot on the table to save time and frustration for all concerned. Prior to this assignment I’d not worked with any of them. I preferred the southwest states. My Alaska network was weak, forcing me to rely on a subcontractor in Juneau who’d made the initial referrals. Over the months I’d gotten to know this group, on a superficial level, at least. This line of work doesn’t engender intimacy, it heightens eccentricities. A man becomes known by his foibles, his personality tics. Illusions of bonding or brotherhood are perfidious.

Pilot John was a boozy loser who’d washed out of life in Vermont. Maddox was a boozy loser who’d gotten dumped from the faculty at the University of Anchorage for a variety of sordid offenses. One too many coeds had dropped her panties for him, I gathered. Moses, our Yupik guide, was a boozy loser who’d blown his Western State degree and done five years in the pen for grand larceny. Nowadays he guided hunters and hikers and nefarious types such as me, even though his expertise lay somewhere in the area of philosophy and he didn’t know an iota more about snow than anybody else schlepping around the Yukon Delta. Parker… him I couldn’t figure. Didn’t smoke, didn’t drink, so what did he do? Clean as a whistle except for some domestic bullshit with a younger brother. His specialty was photography and he knew his way around the northern territories. The mystery was why a smart, clean-living guy like him couldn’t get a reputable gig. Punching his brother in the kisser wasn’t a satisfactory explanation for why he’d become persona non grata.

I hate mysteries, but the solution to this one had already suggested itself to me. What to do with my conclusions was the problem—

—I kicked in a lot of doors and looked under a lot of rocks to discover these five most pertinent facts of the Ralph Smyth case.

Fact One: He’d received training as a playwright and dramatic actor and it hadn’t helped. His oeuvre mainly consisted of crappy black-and-white monster flicks that would’ve mildly entertained my twelve-year-old self.

His schtick was playing second banana to the main villain. He chewed scenery as Igor or Renfield in at least half the movies and as an enforcer, arm-breaker, or button man in most of the others.

Fact Two: Smyth had had the reputation as a real sonofabitch. Small-time actor, yet connected behind the scenes. His father had owned majority interest in a lighting and set-making company. Money opened all the right doors. Ralphie baby was chummy with Karloff, Lugosi, and Cushing, and every two-bit producer that came down the pike. He enjoyed conning young, naïve starlet wannabes. He seduced them, screwed them, strung them out on dope, and then turned them over to one of the slimeball directors for further abuse and exploitation. Molly Lindstrom, so keen to escape the tyranny of daddy dearest, was just another fly in Smyth's web. She vanished six months after principal photography wrapped on *Ardor.* The authorities looked into it, Burt Lindstrom being important and such. Never came to anything.

Fact Three: The case went cold and Smyth dropped the acting gig and disappeared into the woodwork. His trail wound all over, from Juneau, to Anchorage, to Fairbanks, and west toward the bitter coast. He was a ghost with many aliases: George Renfro, Ogden Shoemaker, Bobby Stoker, and Gerald Bluefield were the popular ones. He had plenty of cash, and Alaska isn't the kind of place where people ask a lot of prying questions. There was a long line of secretive white men seeking some grand destiny in the wild.

I grudgingly admitted Gander was correct in his assessment that Smyth was on the trail of something big. He was a man of disconcerting depths. For example, our long-lost actor hadn't simply starred in the much-reviled *Ardor*, he'd written the script and sold it to the studio. Uncredited to boot. He'd allegedly gotten wasted at a cast party and told a grip that the Dracula legends were rooted in fact. *Yeah, Vlad the Impaler,* said the grip. Smyth laughed and said, *Not the Tepes horseshit. Think the Devil's Triangle. Think the sailing stones of Death Valley.*

Fact Four: Nine people had gone missing in the various regions of Alaska coinciding with Smyth's travels. Drunks, lost hunters, adventurers. Folks nobody would miss unless, like me, one paid attention to patterns. My man Smyth was a pervert and a cad of the worst sort. Sorting the old papers he'd

lovingly collected on ritual cannibalism and human sacrifice, I wondered if he was also a murderer.

Fact Five: There are six quarts of blood in the body of a man and I'm low, very low. Now I know I should've stayed in Seattle with my true love—

—Sprung joints of the plane seethe smoke. Flames streak from the cowling that's half-nosed into the ice. The smoke is black and thick. The column rises several feet, and then spills down over the ground, pressed hard by the frigid temperature. Visages of devils float in the tide and shoot forth hot red tongues. The wind whips it until it boils. Concupiscent curds of death. Where oh where is my shirtless and muscular roller of big cigars? Call that bastard in here on the double! I have my second chuckle of the day in celebration of wit undimmed by the impingement of certain doom.

We've trudged a good distance inland. The plane is a toy. My glove blocks it easily. We are even farther from the brightening cold star fields. The blue-black horizon has enfolded the ocean like a curtain dropping onto a stage. Moses leads. Parker and Maddox drag me and our pitiable remnants of gear on a canvas tarp salvaged from the wreckage. My knee is sprained, my back is in spasms. I can but hope that's the worst of my injuries. We'll know tonight when the universe freezes and the aspirin supply disappears.

Pilot John screams way back there where we left him in his pyre. I can barely hear him over the rising wind and the crunch of boots in the snow. The men stop in their tracks and gaze back across the flats. Vapor wisps from their mouths. For a moment they resemble a lonely trio of caribou, separated from the main herd and bewildered at a sound foreign to their existence.

"Hey, he's not dead," Maddox says to Moses. His tone is reproachful.

Moses pulls down his hood. His face is broad and dark. His mustache is silver with frost. He frowns. No, he definitely doesn't look like a man who wants to believe what he's hearing. He stares wordlessly into the gathering darkness, into the coal at its heart.

"Oh, no. Moses, you said he was dead."

"That's the wind."

"No, it's him. God help us." Maddox crosses himself.

Parker glances from man to man. “What’s happening?” He really doesn’t get it. His hat has fur-lined earflaps; maybe that’s why.

“Pilot John is frying,” I say through gritted teeth. Nobody says anything for a minute or so. The screams have stopped. My hunch is the unlucky bastard woke up to his flesh popping like bacon, then promptly succumbed to smoke inhalation. Here’s hoping. I can’t help myself; I quote from the poetry of that long dead Yukon sage, Robert Service: *“The Northern Lights have seen queer sights, but the queerest they ever did see was the night on the marge of Lake Le Barge I cremated Sam McGee!”*

Moses raises his hood again. His coat is a really nice homemade one with a wolf ruff and more fur trim at the wrist and ankle openings. It’ll take him a lot longer to freeze to death than it will for everybody else. He starts walking again, toward the foothills of the Kilbuck mountains. I can’t help but imagine them as tombstones.

“Shouldn’t we stay with the plane?” Parker says this for the third or fourth time. He managed to save his best camera and carries it on a lanyard around his neck.

“We’ll die in the open.” Moses doesn’t glance backward. Shoulders squared, head lowered, he plods on.

“Gonna buy it either way,” Maddox says, low and grumbly. Not a protest, it is an utterance of fact.

“Somebody might see the smoke,” Parker says. His is the faint and fading voice of reason swallowed by the wilderness and the indifference of his comrades.

“C’mon,” Maddox says. A bear of a man, red-eyed from lack of drink. He and Parker grasp the edges of the tarp and begin dragging me again.

According to the maps, long ago there was a village around here. I’d hoped to find Smyth or some clue regarding Smyth’s whereabouts. The village has crumbled, or the ice has buried it. No trace of the fish camps or the mining camps either. A cruel wind blows, scouring the ice to dirt in spots and making brick ramps of the snow in others. The wind doesn’t ever really stop in this place. It has, like Sandburg’s grass, work to do erasing all signs of human habitation. The wind is the tongue of a ravening beast. It licks at our warmth, the feeble light of our miserly souls.

Our company founders and staggers and scrambles onward. It is dark when we tuck into the shelter of a rocky crevice. Nearby, the face of the mountain is glaciated. Water oozes and steams over ice stalactites and we lap at it. My lips are already cracking and it's only been a few hours. This kind of weather leaches a man, withers him to a husk.

By the beam of a heavy-duty flashlight, the men stretch the tarp as a windbreak. They shore and buffer the enclosure with hastily gathered alder branches and rocks. In the end, we basically cuddle into a hole and pull the lid over ourselves. I'm wedged between Parker and Moses. A rock digs into my spine. It is cold, concentrated cold, and numbs me with dreadful immediacy. The canvas molds over my face in a death masque, tightening, then slackening with the gusts. The wind roars in the absolute blackness. Farther off, a fluting note as ice shears free of its mooring and is dashed upon the rocks.

Tomorrow we'll find a better shelter, build a fire if we can, if we survive the night. I shiver uncontrollably. I am a particle adrift in a gulf. The horizontal fall is endless—

—"What's going on with you?" Conway says. He's got my cock in his hand, but not much is happening. "You're different these days." A not-good kind of different, apparently, because his voice is too flat to mean anything else.

I'm on my back on the bed, staring at the wall at the Walwal tapestry of stigmatic Christ that I once appropriated from the estate of a wealthy geezer in Maryland. The image doesn't thrill me, nothing does. I am bereft and confused. I am still falling, have been since the night I went to Gander's house. When was that anyway? Before or after the year in Alaska? Before or after the crash?

"Sam?"

I turn my head and look him in the eye. I understand what he wants and choose to play dumb, which is a mistake. Despite his Ivy League degree, Conway's not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but he's far from dull. He's intuitive as the devil. Sometimes we're so synched it's as if he's in my head. Cue the persistent whisper in the back of my mind: *I came here to the coldest place I could find because it slows everything. The cold.* There is no

way to explain my experience in Alaska to Conway any more than I could to the investigators or the shrink. Not in a truthful fashion. To the cops and officials I gave lies. With my beloved, I let my smile be the lie. Only, he isn't having it.

"Sam. Where are the others?"

I wish I knew. Except, I do know—

—The storm lasts thirty-nine hours, then there's a lull. Maddox crawls forth, reborn from the stone womb into a new Ice Age. The sun is a crimson blob low on the horizon, Polyphemus glaring through a hole in the clouds. The other two men follow him, creaking and cracking as they move. They are stick men, dry as tinder. It is so cold spit freezes on my lips. It is so cold my tongue is a clammy lump, separate from the rest of my flesh. Thirst gouges my throat. The others stand over me, black silhouettes seething. Maddox and Parker yank me from the hole like I'm a sack of feathers. Parker hands me a snowshoe to use as a crutch. I'm wobbly and in a lot of pain. On my feet and under my own power, however.

Moses says, "There's gonna be another blow." He's covered in a glittery coat of hoarfrost. He resembles a ghost. We all do. I'm thinking we're very close to it now. The abyss that men tumble into when they shuffle off the mortal coil is right here, always present in places such as this one. The bones of the earth are all around us.

We need a shelter, a fire, and water. Moses chops ice with a hatchet and stows it in a bag. We move against the flank of the mountains, searching for a cave or an abandoned cabin, any kind of habitation. The wind picks up again—

—There's a scene in *Ardor* that transcends the smut and the schlock. It is the scene wherein dutiful Renfield and the count repose after a murderous orgy. The count reveals that his body is an illusion, a projection of pure darkness given fleshly form. He isn't a sentient creature, merely the imitation of one, the echo of one. The consumption of blood is a metaphor, larger than sex, more terrible than repression. *There's a hole no man can fill,* says the count. *No amount of love or hate or heat poured into the pit. No amount of light. I am the voice of the abyss.*

The idea of Dracula as genius loci is, well, genius. Vampires as black holes, the dull and ravenous points of a behemoth's fangs. Out of place for a smut flick, I admit, yet brilliant. Too bad it didn't clue me in to my imminent peril. By a trick of the camera, Dracula implodes in slow motion, a star collapsing into itself, and for a moment the bed is rent with a slash of radiant blackness and bits of ash.

Then the film skips and it's back to fucking and sucking—

—I emerge from the bathroom and find Conway naked atop the covers. He's peering through a magnifying glass at the papers from the antique valise Professor Gander gave me.

Valise and contents are dated at approximately ninety years old. The leather is wrinkled, the documents crinkled and yellow as the piss I just took. These items, the curious circumstances of its last owner's flight from civilization, are supposed to convince me. Silly, wicked Gander. The only thing that convinces me is money.

Conway frowns. "Who wrote this? The fellow's penmanship was atrocious. From this passage all I can make out is, *My wound won't close."*

I don't get a chance to answer because the next slide clicks into place and I'm shot forward in time and back to Alaska. Nobody knows the trouble I see, except my comrades, and none of them can do shit about it either.

Smyth emerges from the storm to deliver us from our predicament. His skull is stove in, as if by a hammer blow, so I can make out the ossified coils of his forebrain and I'm trying to remember if Dr. Seward trepanned Renfield in attempt to save his life. Smyth's appearance is more monstrous than any master makeup artist could hope to devise. He is an upright cadaver manipulated by strings of icy vapor.

His song is irresistible, although he explains it's not his, that he's merely a vessel. He speaks of cabbages and kings and how a combination of saline and cold will send a death spike into the depths of the sea, killing everything it touches. He describes a crack that runs through the dark of space and how it bends the light, how it wears faces, and how it wails. How it drinks heat. He is a madman. I've never seen a tongue so long or black.

Eventually, he lights a wooden pipe and passes it around the circle. Claims the hash is from a batch made by monks in 1756, so it's the good stuff.

Calls it crypt dust, or something like that. Insists we fortify ourselves for the walk, and nobody argues. I don't taste much of anything, don't feel much of anything, and decide it's probably leaves and twigs. I change my tune a few minute later when the sun begins to contract and expand like an iris.

He leads us to a palace he's carved from ice and rock. Nothing lives anywhere around his home. The desiccated carcasses of bats lie strewn everywhere. Hundreds of them. A carpet of shrunken heads and brittle matchstick bones. Rocks for furniture, icicle stalactites for chandeliers, an irregular pit in the tilted floor. The pit is approximately four feet in diameter. It wheezes a foul, volcanic draft.

Smyth says coming down from the experience of starring in *Ardor* was nearly the death of him. In a fit of despair, he went to his dressing room and drank a fifth of bourbon and shot himself in the head. He wore hats everywhere after that incident.

I came here to the coldest place I could find because it slows everything. The cold. It keeps me. While he's talking, we're in a state of exultant exhaustion. We've taken a hit of the dragon and the world has the substance of a dream.

Parker asks about the hole.

"That's the crack that runs through everything," Smyth says. "I dug it myself." The sonofabitch doesn't even need to move fast, we're all dumb and stuck in our tracks as cows lowing on the ramp to the killing floor. He uses the hatchet that Moses brought along, two or three licks apiece. I'm lucky, it's only my thigh, and Parker's kind of lucky too.

The bodies of the unfortunate slough into the pit that's awaited us a million years—

—My parents are old as the dust that blows across Texas where they've retreated to for those golden years. I haven't spoken to them since Vietnam got cooking. Dad didn't take to his son turning out gay, honorable combat service or not, and Mom, well, as her husband went, so did she.

It's been a few months and I've slowed down on the pills and the booze and am sufficiently restored to humanity to report my true findings, the findings I haven't told anyone, not Gander, not the cops, not Conway.

Molly Lindstrom's parents remind me of mine, except a bunch richer. Their house is in a gated neighborhood amid carefully manicured forestland outside of Seattle. Burt Lindstrom made his dough in the engineering division of a certain well-known aerospace company. His is a precise and austere mind. Wouldn't know it from the décor. Antique hunting rifles, swords, and moose heads on the walls and nothing to do with aviation or aviators. He favors red-and-black-checked plaids, denim pants, and logging boots. Makes Lee Marvin seem soft and cuddly in comparison. His wife, Margaret, a former bathing beauty, has gone thick in the middle. She's in a dress, a blue one. Her eyes are cruel as a bird's.

Their guard, a goon named Larry, stands at the window. He's peering through binoculars back the way I drove in. "Brown sedan, last year's model. Just pulled a U-turn outside the gate. Two guys." He keeps on scanning with the binoculars. His lips move silently. He's got a gun slung under his ugly tweed jacket.

I'd seen the car on the highway, trying to blend with traffic and not quite making it.

"That'll be the feds," Mr. Lindstrom says to the goon while he stares at the brand-spanking-new scars on my cheeks where the frostbite laid its brand. "Got you on short leash, huh? They reckon you kilt that man of theirs. Left him on the ice. I gotta buck says you did. Kind of hombre you are."

Parker's white smile flickers in my mind. "I didn't kill him," I say with real weariness. It's the hundredth-and-first time I've said the words.

"And I don't give a shit," says Mr. Lindstrom.

"A drink?" Mrs. Lindstrom is already gliding toward the liquor cabinet. She's got the grace of a magician's assistant. Lickety-split, hubby and I are each clutching a Scotch and soda in front of the hearth. There's a fire in there. I'm sweating in the nice suit Conway made me wear, but frozen at the core. After Alaska, nothing will ever warm me up again.

She says to him, sweet as pie, "Civility, Burt. We agreed how you'd be." Those eyes again. I wouldn't want to be trapped on a lee shore with her and no supplies.

He smiles like you do when you get punched in the balls. "Sure, hon. How's the booze, Cope? Fix you another?"

“No, sir. I’m fine.” I’m not fine. I’m minus a leg and I use a cane and I’ve gone from recreational drinker to hardened drunk.

“Gander says you have something for us. You met Smyth.” Mr. Lindstrom’s mouth twists and he visibly restrains himself, turns away, and says to the goon, “Get some air, Larry.” The goon makes himself scarce.

Mrs. Lindstrom moves close to me. I doubt there’s much contact between her and the husband, and she’s starved. She smells bitter, like winter flowers. “He told you about my daughter?”

I nod and sip Scotch.

“You anglin’ for more cash?” He gives a snort of contempt. “I’ll write you a damned check on the spot. Out with it, man!”

“Easy, dear, easy,” she says to her husband. Then to me, “We saw the film, Mr. Cope. There isn’t anything you can say that will shock us. All we want is a little peace. Her marker is over an empty plot. I can’t bear it anymore.”

He drains his glass, seems poised to chuck it at the fire. “She had a bit part. Basically an extra, for Chrissake. Bride of Dracula Number Three. So what? Those rat bastard producers seduced her. Smyth sold her a bill of goods how he was gonna make her the next Monroe. Molly was a good girl. She mixed with bad people.” He runs out of steam and stares dumbly into the distance.

“No argument here,” I say. Bride of Dracula Number Three took it in the ass on screen, and did some other naughty stuff too. Not mine to judge. I steel myself. “Molly’s dead, ma’am. She died ten years ago in Los Angeles. Remember when Mr. Lindstrom flew to L.A. to help the private dick he’d hired to search? Well, he and this lowlife named Brent Williams found her all right, shacked up with a hood from the projects, strung out on heroin and hooking for rent money. *Ardor* ruined her. Ruined her in every way you can imagine. There was an argument. Your husband killed her and the pimp in a twenty-dollar-a-night motel room. It was an accident, everything simply got out of hand. The dick got rid of the bodies himself.” I stare at her, try to project compassion at her blank, shocked face. “It was you who hired me, isn’t that right, ma’am? Your husband signed the check, but it was you, because you couldn’t have known, and he went along, played the part of the

grieving dad. And I guess maybe you *are* grieving, Mr. Lindstrom. Maybe you're sorry for what you've done."

Nobody says anything for a bit. Then Mrs. Lindstrom bursts into tears and flees the room, face buried in her hands.

"You bastard," Mr. Lindstrom says and shakes his head the way a confused bear might. "You come in here and make my wife cry? Bad mistake, son." He takes a knife from his pocket. A big one with a fixed blade that would've done nicely as a bayonet.

The guard confiscated my piece when I came onto the property. That's why I'm standing next to a pair of crossed cavalry sabers. I hope against hope they're sharp—

—Smyth wrote this in one of his abandoned journals: As a boy I started with bugs and small animals. I accidentally clipped the end of my index finger off at age sixteen while stacking chairs in the school gymnasium. It completely repaired itself within two and half years. Spontaneous regeneration. This was long before I discovered the Bluefield papers. Bluefield was a crank living in the wrong century. Still, his instincts were true. After my last film with Lewton, I visited Borneo on holiday and trekked into the brush, learning the old ways. I ate a fresh human heart. The hetman of a friendly tribe told me I'd inherit the strength and the vigor of the fallen warrior. It tasted sweet. There's no returning from that. Sadly, it's only part of the secret. The keyhole you peer through. The dark mystery itself is unapproachable.—

—Parker is still ticking, still got some fight in him. He's missing some pieces, so not *that* much fight. He says to me in a tired voice, "I suppose the fact your grandfather was a gangster makes us meeting like this sort of poetic."

"You say poetic, I say pathetic. Wait a second… You're a cop?" I mug at him, best as I am able. He chuckles, horribly. I'm groggy. Haven't had a sip of water in hours. Two days since I last ate. The tips of my fingers and toes are numb and my heart knocks too fast. I'm bruised, possible concussed. My back is sprained. Worst of all, my left thigh is severely lacerated. None of this bodes well.

Beyond this litany of woes looms a bigger problem.

The others have bled out on the ice floor of the crystal cave. All that life coagulated into a crimson slick. The enormous cascade of blood is too hot to completely freeze. It oozes toward the hole in the floor. The pit that has awaited us for a million years.

Parker and I cling to a rough section a few feet upslope. We've linked arms and combined our waning strength. The ice is damp and slippery. Inch by inch our purchase loosens and we slide toward doom.

The man who once played Renfield on the silver screen throws back the hood of his bearskin parka and laughs. His hands are bare to the elements, fingernails blackened or gone. I try not to consider what he's done, what he's going to do.

He says, "The tragedy is that the Renfield figure wants what the master already has. Immortality. After all my searching, all my supplication, all my obeisance, I have found only a slower way of dying."

The walls of ice molt crimson. They seep and drip.

My grip fails. Parker groans and slides past me, down the bloody ice chute into the shaft that probably goes straight past hell to China. The groan is just a sound he's making. It doesn't touch his eyes. I'll never get to ask him if he'd gone undercover to bust me or to get a line on Smyth, that alleged murderer of starlets.

A moment later I'm gone too and Smyth whistles to mock my departure—

—And then I die—

—Maybe an eon passed in the void. How would I know? Mostly I spent the time falling like a stone into an abyss. There were interludes where I segued from falling into walking through a vast maze, a hedgerow of obsidian. The sky was also obsidian splintered by jags of white light. The light was so dim and so far away it might've been the inverse of itself. Figures moved in the distance. Moses and Maddox. I couldn't quite catch them to see for certain. Parker paced me by trudging backwards. A bit green around the gills and sickly pale. Breathing, though. I cried out to him and he smiled and drifted away.

Sometimes Smyth's disembodied voice echoed along the twists and turns: "I didn't travel into the wilderness to find the dark. I brought the dark with

me. The seed is inside everybody, waiting for a chance."

Another occasion he said, "I went out there to be alone. You got what you wanted, you stupid twit?"

I realized I was probably talking to myself and in those moments of clarity the maze disintegrated and I'd be lying in that grave on the ice between my comrades, or plummeting from the sky in the plane, or kissing Conway at the Phoenix Theatre, or transfixed in a study while *Ardor* squelched and squealed on the wall and stodgy guests gawked at my apparition.

In every case the snow returns, and covers me—

—I wake in the summer to a good-morning blowjob, but the ruined nerves in my leg kill me and the vertigo unmans me and I scream and Conway has to hold me down until I stop. I lie there in a sweat and tell him the fog has lifted. I remember everything in Technicolor.

He cautions that I can't trust my recollections, claims I returned to Seattle a night before I ever left and then blinks and says he didn't say anything that crazy. He leaves red marker messages on the mirror: *Where's her body, Sam?* I confront him and he kisses my ear and says I didn't get eaten by the Ouroboros and shit out into an alternate universe. Take your meds and do your physical therapy, Sam. *Where's her body, Sam? Where's Parker's body? Where are they, Sam?*

If I didn't die, if this isn't hell, then what has actually transpired is worse. Always something worse. That first night in the storm does for Moses, his fabulous parka notwithstanding. Maddox may or may not have had life in him. Parker is only strong enough to tow one of us and despite my length, I don't weigh much. The good cop drags me back to the seashore and we await rescue near the plane's wreckage. Along the way a diamond-hard sliver of ice or a jagged rock has torn through my overalls and sliced my thigh to the bone. I don't feel it happen and the blood covers my legs like I've a lap full of rubies. We hunker for two days. Parker's face turns black and his eyes go milky blue. He stays with me a while, and then between buffets from the north wind he's gone.

The troopers are able to dig Pilot John's remains from the barbeque pit. They are mystified at the bullet hole in his skull. Bits of glass in there, so the bullet was fired from the ground as he banked the plane for a pass is

what they conclude. Helicopter rides, hospital wards, a long white veil over the universe come next. Ice covers the Earth, then recedes and reveals the green. I'll never walk quite right again. I lose an ear, all my fingernails, my belief in the rational, my sanity.

Night after night I dream of *Ardor* and Renfield in his cell with worms, lice, and flies for sustenance. He gibbers and hoots until the count slips in and maims him, leaves him paralyzed in the shitty rags of his bedding. I follow the camera into his glazed eyeball and come out on the other side inside a cheap motel room in Van Nuys. I'm a fly on the wall during the encounter between Papa Lindstrom and his private dick and Molly Lindstrom. The shouts and the tears are flowing freely when the pimp walks in. Bullets don't have names on them. The girl and the pimp get bundled into the dick's Caddy for a long, lonely ride to the landfill.

I don't have a shred of proof, but the fucking imagery is so vivid, eventually it eats away at me, plagues my waking hours. Lately, I'm convinced that nothing is real, so the unreality of this scenario assumes the same weight as anything else. Conway helps me into the suit I usually wear to funerals and drives me to the Lindstrom estate. I leave him in the car, tell him it won't be fifteen minutes, and then I hobble inside to say the awful things I've got say.

Here's the test. Here's where I receive validation or comeuppance. Maybe it'll be both. For a moment I hesitate on the steps while a goon named Larry approaches. It is lush and green and sweetly humid. Not a glacier in sight—

—Lindstrom charges me with the knife brandished. I'm a step ahead of the game. I drop my cane and snatch the cavalry saber from its ornamental wall hooks. Coming in I'd expected mockery, perhaps indignant outrage, the threat of arrest, and certainly the risk of getting roughed up by one of the old man's goons. Hell, if they'd simply laughed and phoned the funny farm, it wouldn't have surprised me. What I don't account for is how fast the situation escalates into a killing. In retrospect, I can't blame myself for not entirely buying that the dreams were bona fide. Crazy people believe their own bullshit and so forth.

The snarl, the savage glint in his eyes, this is the murder in L.A. reprised. Man, it's not as if I'm a fencer, or anything. I make a haphazard swing

when he gets close and there goes the knife and two of his fingers under a table. Unfortunately for both of us he doesn't take a hint. He leans down and retrieves the knife with his left hand and I hobble forward two steps and swipe at him again, both hands wrapped around the hilt. The sword cleaves through his neck without any trouble and his head plops onto the Persian rug and rolls onto its side so those devil-dog eyes are blinking at me.

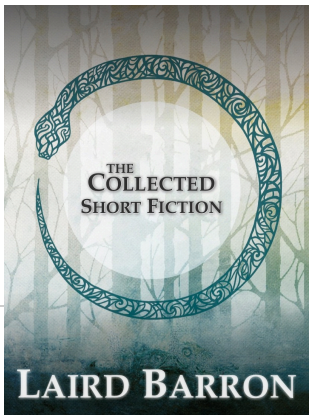
"Oh, shit," I say.

The wife doesn't return and there's a hell of a mess in the parlor, so I leave. The goon doesn't intercept me on my way out the door. I do a spit check of my reflection at the car and don't see any blood on my suit. My hair is mussed and I'm sweating, but that's me these days. I smile at Conway and tell him to take us home. He doesn't suspect anything and I retreat into myself with alacrity. My brain wants to shutter the doors and call it a day. I roll down the window and breathe in the smells of grass and leaves.

A cloud swoops in and paces the car. The breeze gains an edge and snow begins to fall. My heart stops. But it's not snow, it's hail, and Conway hits the wipers and in a minute or two we're through it and gliding beneath glorious blue skies. I place my hand over Conway's and close my eyes and try not to make that transcendental journey to Alaska, or visualize Lindstrom's mouth working up a voiceless curse.

I figure if this isn't a dream, the cops will be waiting at the house. And they are.

Ardor



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—Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, February, 1975

What is it Pilot John says right before we drop from the sky?

Where is Molly's body? No, that's my own voice haunting me on account of someone else's ghost, someone else's guilt.

The pilot's head inclines to the left, slick as any disco floor pro. He gasps and takes the good Lord's name in vain. There's a quality of terror in the sharp inhalation that precedes this utterance. There's rapture in the utterance itself. His words are distorted by electronic interference through the headset. The snarl of a lynx wanting its fill of guts.

Obligingly, the world rolls over and shows its belly—

—I come to after the crash and call Conway's name the way I sometimes do upon surfacing from a nightmare. In this nightmare he is kissing me but his left eye is gone and I can see daylight shining all the way through his skull. He says hot into my mouth, *This wound won't close.*

Now I'm awake and alive. Hell of a surprise, the being alive part.

Snow trickles down through a hole in the fuselage and crystallizes in my lashes and beard. The last of the daylight trickles through the hole too and the world around me resolves into soft focus. Buckets of white light saturate everything until it's all ghostly and delicate. I'm strapped into the far back seat of the Beaver. I close my eyes again and recall low mountains rising on our left and the shadow of the plane descending toward an ice sheet that seemed to stretch unto the end of creation.

Our particular jag of beach lies south of Quinhagak, not that that helps. In the summer, this is a vast circulatory system of bogs and streams on the

edge of the Bering Sea. Ptarmigan and wolves, bears and fish dwell here, feast upon one another here. In the winter, it's one of God's abandoned drawing slates. The temperature is around negative thirty Fahrenheit. That's cold, my babies. The mercury will only keep dropping.

"Conway's in Seattle," Parker says. "He's safe. You're safe. Who's your favorite football team?" His breath is minty. He thinks I'm slipping away when I'm actually slipping *back* into the world. Sweet kid. Handsome, too. Life is gonna wreck him. That's funny. He grips my shoulder. His mittens are blue and white to match the stripes on the plane. "C'mon Sam, stay with me. Who'd you root for in the Super Bowl? The Vikings? I bet you're a Vikings man. My cousin met Fran Tarkenton, says he's a gem. Can't throw a spiral, but a hell of a quarterback anyhow."

"Cowboy fan." I'm remarkably calm, despite this instinctive urge to smack the condescension from him. He means well. His eyes are so blue. Conway's are green and green is my favorite color, so I'm safe, as Parker keeps saying.

"The Cowboys! No kidding? Seattle doesn't have a club. One more year, right?"

"Dad is from Galveston." I haven't thought about my father in an age, much less acknowledged him aloud. Could be a concussion.

"Where's your accent? You don't have an accent."

"Dad does. Classic drawl." I hesitate. My tongue is dry. Goddamned climate. "How are the other guys?" The other guys being pilot John, regional historian Maddox, and our wilderness guide extraordinaire Moses.

"Don't worry about them. Everybody's A-okay. Let's see if we can get you outta here. Gonna be dark any minute now. Moses thinks we need to be somewhere else before then."

His voice is too cheerful. I'm convinced he's lying about everyone being all right. Then I catch a glimpse of Pilot John slumped at the controls, his anorak splashed red. His posture is awkward, inanimate—he's a goner for certain. The engine has to be sitting on his legs. Snapped matchsticks, most definitely. The windshield blasted inward to cover him in rhinestones. I lack the strength to utter recriminations. Abrupt stabs of pain in my lower back suggest my body is coming out of shock. It isn't happy.

Parker strips free of a mitten and there are pills in the palm of his hand. He feeds me the pills.

I clear my throat and say, “Somebody will be along. The posse can’t be far.” Lord, the aspirin is bitter. A slug of lukewarm coffee from Parker’s thermos helps. “John got a Mayday out, didn’t he?” But what I recall is John with both hands on the wheel while the rest of us yell and pray. Nobody touches the radio in the eight or so seconds before it all goes black. “Sonofabitch. Tell me it’s working.” I know it’s not working, though. The radio was smashed on impact along with Pilot John’s body. That’s how this tragedy is unfolding, isn’t it? After making a career of fucking over others, finally we are the ones getting the screw job. O. Henry or Hitchcock should be on the case.

Parker says, “I wonder if you can walk.”

While he struggles to extricate me from the ruins of the plane, I’m thinking not only is it a damned shame Pilot John failed to transmit a Mayday, he didn’t even file a flight plan that accounts for our detour to this wasteland of tundra and ice. We’re at least two hours southwest of the original destination. That potentially lethal blunder is on me. I’d gotten greedy and tried to squeeze in an unscheduled stop. Thanks to me we are all the way up shit creek.

A storm is moving in off the sea. Blizzard conditions will sock in search and rescue craft at Bethel. That means three, possibly four days of roughing it for us. If we’re lucky. How lucky we are remains to be seen.

I cough on the raw taste of smoke.

“Heck.” Parker glances over his shoulder. “Guess she’s on fire.”

Yes, Virginia, we’re in trouble—

—Professor Gander invited me to lunch at the Swan Club in Ballard and laid it all on the table. Entrusted me with a withered valise stuffed with documents and old-timey photos. He endeavored to explain their significance through suggestion and innuendo. Two things I dislike unless we’re talking romance, which we weren’t. I disguised my fascination with a yawn.

He lighted a cigarette and set it in the ashtray without taking a drag first. “The papers were written by RM Bluefield, allegedly a mysterious Victorian fellow whom Stoker based the Renfield character upon. Bluefield was an avowed mystic, a fascination he acquired abroad in Eastern Europe and Asia. He possessed medical training… was obsessed with the concept of immortality, but then, so were many others of that era. His particular interest lay in the notion that it might be obtained through certain blood rites or the consumption of animal organs. Stoker, it is thought, perused the fellow’s papers and then mocked in print Mr. Bluefield’s eccentricity.

“The journals changed hands, most recently belonging to an actor from the 1950s and ’60s named Ralph Smyth. Where *he* acquired them is a matter of conjecture, although it’s of scant consequence. For our purposes, we simply need to locate Smyth himself.”

“Ah, the royal we. There’s a booster, I presume. Got to love those guys. Richer than rich if he’s going through you.”

“Yes, Mr. Cope. I represent a patron. One with very deep pockets.”

“God love ’em. And what does this patron want with Smyth?”

“You will locate him and ask a single question. Return with his answer, whatever that may be.”

“A question?”

“One question. I’ll even write it down for you.” He produced a fancy pen and indeed did write it on a coaster. He also wrote his home address and a set of numbers that represented the payment on offer. A nice plump round figure, to be sure.

I lingered over the coaster and then put it in my pocket. “This is a little odd, professor. Not exactly my normal brief, so to speak. I take it this Smyth character is missing, or else you’d go ask him yourself.”

“It is possible the fellow’s dead, although we suspect he’s very much alive. In hiding, we think. Took a powder into the Alaskan wilderness during the spring of 1967. There are more recent accounts, multiple sightings of a man matching Smyth’s description.”

“Seven years is a long time to be on the lam. The cops want him?”

“The authorities don’t possess evidence to implicate him in any nefarious dealings, such as the disappearance of my patron’s daughter. My patron suspects otherwise, naturally. That’s where you come in.”

“Maybe Smyth’s got an aversion to overly aggressive film buffs.” I smiled, but he didn’t seem amused. “So, I’m going to put together a team and fly all over the ass end of Alaska, hunting for some guy basically nobody’s ever heard of…”

“Ralph Smyth, Ralph Smyth, surely you recall…” Professor Gander buffed his signet ring and waited for the light to dawn in my presumably Neanderthal brain. Fucker wore a cardigan and rimless glasses. He’d gone prematurely white like Warhol.

“Surely I do not.” I took a gulp of Redbreast. Glass number three. I’m not a heavy drinker, but suffering the good professor required extreme measures.

“A poor man’s Lon Chaney, Sr. who eked a career from getting violently offed in a dozen Hammer films. What he’s famous for, however—”

“Nothing, apparently,” I said, a teensy bit drunk already.

Gander bared his mismatched and silver-capped teeth. He wanted a taste of my blood, it could be assumed. “Bravo, Cope. The man is famous for nothing. What he’s *infamous* for is his final role in a French-Canadian art film. *Ardor*. An exceedingly liberal interpretation of *Dracula*. Ten years ago this spring *Ardor* premiered at a Quebec festival, then sank into obscurity. It is reviled by critics and forgotten by the public. Have you seen it? Amazing work.”

“Oh, by art, you mean smut, eh? I dig.”

“Yes, a pornographic movie. Rated X for sex and violence. A notorious piece of cinema, even by genre standards. Banned in many countries. Only a few copies rumored to survive, etcetera, etcetera.”

“I’m sorry I missed this one. A porno retelling of *Dracula*. What will they think of next?”

“The forces at work in the world are endlessly inventive. Artistic autocoprophagy is here to stay.”

I studied him through the haze of his untouched cigarette, preferring not to dignify his comment with a response. I made a mental note to look up

autocoprophagy.

He said, “Why don’t you come by my place tonight and I’ll show you the film? I’ve got a bootleg reel. A few colleagues and some friends of the university will be in attendance. You can mingle, make new acquaintances. A fellow in your line can always use new connections, and a better class of them, too.”

“You and your cronies going to gather around the campfire to watch a stag flick, huh?” I said. “A banned stag flick. That’s a relief. I prefer the company of miscreants.”

“There’s another item we’ll need to discuss,” he said. “The client is a dear friend of mine. That’s why he’s come to me in the wake of the law’s failure to rectify his concerns. Regardless, I’ve reason to believe Smyth went to Alaska on a specific mission. He’s a bibliophile and an antiquarian. His home, which he abandoned, was stuffed with extraordinary… items, shall we say? By all means extract the information my patron requires, but if you can bring home any significant papers or relics, or lacking that, photographic evidence of said, you’ll be generously compensated.”

“Well, in that case, here’s another coaster.”

—I drove over to the professor’s house around nine. Late enough that people would’ve settled in, but before any craziness had gotten started, or so I hoped. Gander struck me as a buttoned-down freak. Perhaps a Wally.

The address he’d scribbled on a coaster led me to an old mansion in the U-District, set back from the street. Parking is hell in the U, so I left the car in a likely spot and walked three blocks. The windows were dark and I wondered if it was the right place until Gander’s housemaid answered the bell and greeted me by name. More of a gasped epithet, really. Her face was pale. She held a candle in an ornamental bowl.

The maid led me to a study eerily illuminated by a silver screen on the far wall. She fled. I got the impression of antique furniture and lots of bookcases. A throng of silhouettes was back-lighted by the screen. I whiffed cherry pipe smoke and fancy cologne, a hint of marijuana.

A film played for this crowd of rustling shadows. Its frames jumped, were poorly spliced; the scenes were muddy and marred by frequent cigarette burns; the color flickered. Tiny subtitles and a strange, scratchy orchestral

symphony accompanied the grunts and cries of the actors, all a half-beat offset from the action itself. Somebody was fucking somebody. Somebody was murdering somebody. Cocks everywhere, thrusting into every opening. A guillotine blade dropped through the neck of a devil clown. Gore splashed the thirteen dancing brides of Dracula and flecked the camera lens. Darkness flooded in. For an instant the gallery dissolved and I became dislocated, a bullet shot into the vacuum of deep space.

The lights came up while the film kept running. Someone said, “Jesus Christ!”

I beheld a congregation of the crème de la crème of UW faculty; fifteen or so middle-aged dudes in sweaters and slacks, drinks and smokes in hand, all of them sniffing in my direction like moles. The departments of anthropology, psychiatry, and literature were well-represented.

Horror stretched Gander’s face in all kinds of unpleasant directions. “What are you doing here?” He gestured as if to ward away an evil spirit. “What are you doing here? You can’t be here.”

I wanted to tell him to piss off, he’d invited me, but I couldn’t speak. There was too much blood in my mouth. I looked down and realized I was naked and covered in blood. I extended my arms like the Vitruvian Man and the room rotated. Centrifugal force pinned me in place. On the screen, washed out, yet immense and wicked, naked Dracula embraced naked Renfield and crushed the life from him. The camera zoomed in on Renfield’s glazed eye, penetrated the iris into the secondary universe, the anti-reality. It was snowing there, in Hell. I was in there, in Hell, in the snow, waving to myself.

A white glow ignited on my left where the doorway to the long hall should’ve hung. Instead, an ice field bloomed through a porthole. So bright, so beautiful, filling up my brain with fog—

—The team assembled at the Bull Moose Diner in downtown Bethel, Alaska to plot a final sequence of site flyovers. Alaska is a big place. We were running out of places to search for our quarry, though. If I couldn’t find Smyth in the next few days, that might be curtains for the expedition.

The frigid Alaskan winter wasn’t doing my mood any favors. Relocating to western Washington for a vacation didn’t sound half bad. I could take

Conway to Lake Crescent for a romantic idyll, or hiking along Hurricane Ridge. Or maybe we'd hole up at my house and drink wine and watch the rain hit the windows.

Is retrieving the bones of a person treasure hunting? Or would you call it grave robbing? Conway posed this question with a smile—he could afford to smile because he didn't know the half of what I did for a living. That was the last time I'd seen him in the flesh. He'd spent the night at my place on Queen Anne Hill. The next morning would find me aboard a jet to Anchorage. He lived across town in North Gate; sold insurance to corporations. The job took him out of my life about as often as mine took me out of his. We'd been lovers for three years. I'm tallish and homely; he's shorter and handsome enough to model if he wanted. He's a man of his word and I'm shifty as they come. The arrangement worked, barely.

Grave robbing? Maybe Conway had it right. Over the past decade I'd flown thrice around the world in the service of numerous scholarly profiteers of the exact same mold as Professor Gander. Missions revolved around wresting artifacts of historical significance from the locals, or better yet, absconding with said relics before the locals even suspected chicanery. Sometimes, this job being an example, I was sent to retrieve a real live person, or extract information from said. You never knew. My chief talents? A willingness to follow orders and endure a not inconsiderable measure of privation and hardship along the way. I don't balk at getting my hands dirty. Runs in the family. Granddad shot people for the Irish mob back in the Roaring Twenties; made an art of it, or so the legends go. I'm not even close to being that kind of a hardcase, just sufficiently mean to get matters across when it's called for.

The future would take care of itself. Meanwhile, here I sat in Bethel with a string to play out: four sites within striking distance of the village. Gold Rush mining camps abandoned since World War II, except for infrequent visits by tourists, researchers, and ne'er-do-wells. That last was us. My comrades were more inclined to the business of looting and pillaging native artifacts under the guise of academic inquiry.

"A sentient being isn't an artifact separate from the universe," said Moses as he counted out bills for the waiter. None of us had the first clue who he was speaking to. "Sentient beings are the sensors of the universe, its nerve

endings. A colony of ants, a gaggle of geese, a city-state, are the places where enough sensors amass and the universe becomes self-aware.” He paused with a scowl. “Somebody needs to kick in another two bucks.”

That was doubtless Maddox who’d skimped on the tip. I tossed a five-spot on the table to save time and frustration for all concerned. Prior to this assignment I’d not worked with any of them. I preferred the Southwest states. My Alaska network was weak, forcing me to rely on a subcontractor in Juneau who’d made the initial referrals. Over the months I’d gotten to know this group, on a superficial level, at least. This line of work doesn’t engender intimacy, it heightens eccentricities. A man becomes known by his foibles, his personality tics. Illusions of bonding or brotherhood are perfidious.

Pilot John was a boozy loser who’d washed out of life in Vermont. Maddox was a boozy loser who’d gotten dumped from the faculty at the University of Anchorage for a variety of sordid offenses; one too many coeds had dropped her panties for him, I gathered. Moses, our Yupik guide, was a boozy loser who’d blown his Western State degree and done five years in the pen for grand larceny. Nowadays he guided hunters and hikers and nefarious types such as me, even though his expertise lay somewhere in the area of philosophy and he didn’t know an iota more about snow than anybody else schlepping around the Yukon Delta. Parker, I couldn’t figure. Didn’t smoke, didn’t drink, so what did he do? Clean as a whistle except for some domestic bullshit with a younger brother. His specialty was photography and he knew his way around the Northern Territories. The mystery was why a smart, clean-living guy like him couldn’t get a reputable gig. Punching his brother in the kisser wasn’t a satisfactory explanation for why he’d become persona non grata.

I hate mysteries, but the solution to this one had already suggested itself to me. What to do with my conclusions was the problem—

—I kicked in a lot of doors and looked under a lot of rocks to discover five pertinent facts of the Ralph Smyth case.

Fact One: He’d received training as a playwright and dramatic actor and it hadn’t helped. His oeuvre mainly consisted of crappy black-and-white monster flicks that would’ve mildly entertained my twelve-year-old self.

His shtick was playing second banana to the main villain. He chewed scenery as Igor or Renfield in at least half the movies and as an enforcer, arm-breaker, or button man in most of the others.

Fact Two: Smyth had had the reputation as a real sonofabitch. Small-time actor, yet connected behind the scenes. His father had owned majority interest in a lighting and set-making company. Money opened all the right doors. Ralphie baby was chummy with Karloff, Lugosi, and Cushing, and every two-bit producer that came down the pike. He enjoyed conning young, naïve starlet wannabes. He seduced them, screwed them, strung them out on dope and then turned them over to one of the slimeball directors for further abuse and exploitation. Molly Lindstrom, so keen to escape the tyranny of daddy dearest, was another fly in Smyth's web. She vanished six months after principal photography wrapped on *Ardor*. The authorities looked into it, Burt Lindstrom being important and such. Never came to anything.

Fact Three: The case went cold and Smyth dropped the acting gig and disappeared into the woodwork. His trail wound all over, from Juneau, to Anchorage, to Fairbanks, and west toward the bitter coast. He was a ghost with many aliases: George Renfro, Ogden Shoemaker, Bobby Stoker, and Gerald Bluefield were the popular ones. He had plenty of cash and Alaska isn't the kind of place where people ask a lot of prying questions. There was a long line of secretive white men seeking some grand destiny in the wild.

I grudgingly admitted Professor Gander was correct in his assessment that Smyth was on the trail of something big. He was a man of disconcerting depths. For example, our long-lost actor hadn't simply starred in the much reviled *Ardor*, he'd written the script and sold it to the studio. Uncredited to boot. He'd allegedly gotten wasted at a cast party and told a grip that the Dracula legends were rooted in fact. *Yeah, Vlad the Impaler,* said the grip. Smyth laughed and said, *Not the Tepes horseshit. Think the Devil's Triangle. Think the sailing stones of Death Valley.*

Fact Four: Nine people had gone missing in the various regions of Alaska coinciding with Smyth's travels. Drunks, lost hunters, adventurers. Folks nobody would miss unless, like me, one paid attention to patterns. My man Smyth was a pervert and a cad of the worst sort. Sorting the old papers he'd

lovingly collected on ritual cannibalism and human sacrifice, I suspected he was also a murderer.

Fact Five: There are six quarts of blood in the body of a man and I'm low, very low. Now I know I should've stayed in Seattle with my true love—

—Sprung joints of the plane seethe smoke. Flames streak from the cowling that's half nosed into the ice. The smoke is black and thick. The column rises several feet, and then spills down over the ground, pressed hard by the frigid temperature. Visages of devils float in the tide and shoot forth hot red tongues. The wind whips it until it boils. Concupiscent curds of death. Where oh where is my shirtless and muscular roller of big cigars? Call that bastard in here on the double! I have my second chuckle of the day in celebration of wit undimmed by the impingement of certain doom.

We've trudged a good distance inland. The plane is a toy. My glove blocks sight of it easily. We are even farther from the brightening stars. The blue-black horizon has enfolded the ocean like a curtain dropping onto a stage. Moses leads. Parker and Maddox drag me and our pitiable remnants of gear on a canvas tarp salvaged from the wreckage. My knee is sprained; my back is in spasms. I can but hope that's the worst of my injuries. We'll know tonight when the universe freezes and the aspirin supply disappears.

Pilot John screams way back there where we left him in his pyre. I can barely hear him over the rising wind and the crunch of boots in the snow. The men stop in their tracks and gaze back across the flats. Vapor wisps from their mouths. For a moment they resemble a lonely trio of caribou, separated from the main herd and bewildered at a sound foreign to their existence.

"Hey, he's not dead," Maddox says to Moses. His tone is reproachful.

Moses pulls down his hood. His face is broad and dark. His mustache is silver with frost. He frowns. No, he definitely doesn't look like a man who wants to believe what he's hearing. He stares wordlessly into the gathering darkness, into the coal at its heart.

"Oh, no. Moses, you said he was dead."

"That's the wind."

"No, it's him. God help us." Maddox crosses himself.

Parker glances from man to man. “What’s happening?” He really doesn’t get it. His hat has fur-lined earflaps; maybe that’s why.

“Pilot John is frying,” I say through gritted teeth. Nobody says anything for a minute or so. The screams have stopped. My hunch is the unlucky bastard woke up to his flesh popping like bacon, then promptly succumbed to smoke inhalation. Here’s hoping. I can’t help myself; I quote from the poetry of that long dead Yukon sage, Robert Service: *The Northern Lights have seen queer sights, but the queerest they ever did see was the night on the marge of Lake Le Barge I cremated Sam McGee!*

Moses raises his hood again. His coat is a really nice homemade one with a wolf ruff and more fur trim at the wrist and ankle openings. It’ll take him a lot longer to freeze to death than it will for everybody else. He starts walking again, toward the foothills of the Kilbuck mountains. I can’t help but imagine them as tombstones.

“Shouldn’t we stay with the plane?” Parker says this for the third or fourth time. He managed to save his best camera and carries it on a lanyard around his neck.

“We’ll die in the open.” Moses doesn’t glance backward. Shoulders squared, head lowered, he plods on.

“Gonna buy it either way,” Maddox says, low and grumbly. Not a protest, it is an utterance of fact.

“Somebody might see the smoke,” Parker says. His is the faint and fading voice of reason swallowed by the wilderness and the indifference of his comrades.

“C’mon,” Maddox says. A bear of a man, red-eyed from lack of drink. He and Parker grasp the edges of the tarp and begin dragging me again.

According to the maps, long ago there was a village around here. I’d hoped to find Smyth or some clue regarding Smyth’s whereabouts. The village has crumbled, or the ice has buried it. No trace of the fish camps or the mining camps either. A cruel wind blows, scouring the ice to dirt in spots and making brick ramps of the snow in others. The wind doesn’t ever really stop in this place. It has, like Sandburg’s grass, work to do erasing all signs of human habitation. The wind is the tongue of a ravening beast. It licks at our warmth, the feeble light of our miserly souls.

Our company founders and staggers and scrambles onward. It is dark when we tuck into the shelter of a rocky crevice. Nearby, the face of the mountain is glaciated. Water oozes and steams over ice stalactites and we lap at it. My lips are already cracking and it's only been a few hours. This kind of weather leaches a man, withers him to a husk.

By the beam of a heavy-duty flashlight, the men stretch the tarp as a windbreak. They shore and buffer the enclosure with hastily gathered alder branches and rocks. In the end, we cuddle into a hole and pull the lid over ourselves. I'm wedged between Parker and Moses. A rock digs into my spine. It is cold, concentrated cold, and numbs me with dreadful immediacy. The canvas molds over my face in a death mask, tightening, then slackening with the gusts. The wind roars in the absolute blackness. Farther off, a fluting note as ice shears free of its mooring and is dashed upon the rocks.

Tomorrow we'll find a better shelter, build a fire if we can, if we survive the night. I shiver uncontrollably. I am a particle adrift in a gulf. The horizontal fall is endless—

—"What's going on with you?" Conway says. He's got my cock in his hand, but not much is happening. "You're different these days." A not good kind of different, apparently, because his voice is too flat to mean anything else.

I'm on my back on the bed, staring at the wall, at the Wawal tapestry of a stigmatic Christ that I appropriated from the estate of a wealthy geezer in Maryland. The image doesn't thrill me, nothing does. I am bereft and confused. I am still falling; have been since the night I went to Gander's house. When was that anyway? Before or after the year in Alaska? Before or after the crash?

"Sam?"

I turn my head and look him in the eye. He's whole, handsome. I understand what he wants and choose to play dumb, which is a mistake. Despite his Ivy League degree Conway's not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but he's far from dull. He's intuitive as the devil. Sometimes we're so synched it's as if he's in my head. Cue the persistent whisper in the back of my mind: *I came here to the coldest place I could find because it slows everything. The cold.* There is no way to explain my experience in Alaska to

Conway any more than I could to the investigators or the shrink. Not in a truthful fashion. To the cops and officials, I gave lies. With my beloved, I let my smile be the lie. Only, he isn't having it.

"Sam. Where are the others?"

I wish I knew. Except, I do know—

—The storm lasts thirty-nine hours, then there's a lull. Maddox crawls forth, reborn from the stone womb into a new Ice Age. The sun is a crimson blob low on the horizon, Polyphemus glaring through a hole in the clouds. The other two men follow him, creaking and cracking as they move. They are stick men, dry as tinder. It is so cold spit freezes on my lips. It is so cold my tongue is a clammy lump, separate from the rest of my flesh. Thirst gouges my throat. The others stand over me, black silhouettes seething. Maddox and Parker yank me from the hole like I'm a sack of feathers. Parker hands me a snowshoe to use as a crutch. I'm wobbly and in a lot of pain. On my feet and under my own power, however.

Moses says, "There's gonna be another blow." He's covered in a glittery coat of hoarfrost. He resembles a ghost. We all do. I'm thinking we're very close to it now. The abyss that men tumble into when they shuffle off the mortal coil is right here, always present in places such as this one. The bones of the earth are all around us.

We need a shelter, a fire, and water. Moses chops ice with a hatchet and stows it in a bag. We move against the flank of the mountains, searching for a cave or an abandoned cabin, any kind of habitation. The wind picks up again—

—There's a scene in *Ardor* that transcends the smut and the schlock. It is the scene wherein dutiful Renfield and the Count repose after a murderous orgy. The count reveals that his body is an illusion, a projection of pure darkness given fleshly form. He isn't a sentient creature, merely the imitation of one, the echo of one. The consumption of blood is a metaphor, larger than sex, more terrible than repression. *There's a hole no man can fill,* says the count. *No amount of love or hate or heat poured into the pit. No amount of light. I am the voice of the abyss.*

The idea of Dracula as genius loci is, well, genius. Vampires as black holes, the dull and ravenous points of a behemoth's fangs. Out of place for a smut

flick, I admit, yet brilliant. Too bad it didn't clue me in to my imminent peril. By a trick of the camera, *Dracula* implodes in slow motion, a star collapsing into itself, and for a moment the bed is rent with a slash of radioactive blackness and bits of ash.

Then the film skips and it's back to fucking and sucking—

—I emerge from the bathroom and find Conway naked atop the covers. He's peering through a magnifying glass at the papers from the antique valise Professor Gander gave me.

Valise and contents are dated at approximately ninety years old. The leather is wrinkled, the documents crinkled and yellow as the piss I just took. These items, the curious circumstances of its last owner's flight from civilization, are supposed to convince me. Silly, wicked Gander. The only thing that convinces me is money.

Conway frowns. "Who wrote this? The fellow's penmanship was atrocious. From this passage all I can make out is, "*My wound won't close.*"

I don't get a chance to answer because the next slide clicks into place and I'm shot forward in time and back to Alaska. Nobody knows the trouble I see, except my comrades and none of them can do shit about it either.

Smyth emerges from the storm to deliver us from our predicament. His skull is stove in, as if by a hammer blow, so I can make out the ossified coils of his forebrain and I'm trying to remember if Dr. Seward trepanned Renfield in an attempt to save his life. Smyth's appearance is more monstrous than any master makeup artist could hope to devise. He is an upright cadaver manipulated by strings of icy vapor.

His song is irresistible, although he explains it's not his, that he's merely a vessel. He speaks of cabbages and kings and how a combination of saline and cold will send a death spike into the depths of the sea, killing everything it touches. He describes a crack that runs through the dark of space and how it bends the light, how it wears faces and how it wails. How it drinks heat. He is a madman. I've never seen a tongue so long or black.

Eventually, he lights a wooden pipe and passes it around the circle. Claims the hash is from a batch made by monks in 1756, so it's the good stuff. Calls it crypt dust, or something like that. Insists we fortify ourselves for the walk, and nobody argues. I don't taste much of anything, don't feel much of

anything, and decide it’s probably leaves and twigs. I change my tune a few minutes later when the sun begins to contract and expand like an iris.

He leads us to a palace he’s carved from ice and rock. Nothing lives anywhere around his home. The desiccated carcasses of bats lie strewn everywhere. Hundreds of them. A carpet of shrunken heads and brittle matchstick bones. Rocks for furniture, icicle stalactites for chandeliers, an irregular pit in the tilted floor. The pit is approximately four feet in diameter. It wheezes a foul, volcanic draft.

Smyth says coming down from the experience of starring in *Ardor* was nearly the death of him. In a fit of despair, he went to his dressing room and drank a fifth of bourbon and shot himself in the head. He wore hats everywhere after that incident.

I came here to the coldest place I could find because it slows everything. The cold. It keeps me. While he’s talking, we’re in a state of exultant exhaustion. We’ve taken a hit of the dragon and the world has the substance of a dream.

Parker asks about the hole.

“That’s the crack that runs through everything,” Smyth says. “I dug it myself.” The sonofabitch doesn’t even need to move fast, we’re all dumb and stuck in our tracks as cows lowing on the ramp to the killing floor. He uses the hatchet that Moses brought along, two or three licks apiece. I’m lucky, it’s only my thigh, and Parker’s kind of lucky too.

The bodies of the unfortunate slough into the pit that’s awaited us a million years—

—My parents are old as the dust that blows across Texas where they’ve retreated to for those golden years. I haven’t spoken to them since Vietnam got cooking. Dad didn’t take to his son turning out gay, honorable combat service or not, and Mom, well, as her husband went, so did she.

It’s been a few months and I’ve slowed down on the pills and the booze and am sufficiently restored to humanity to report my true findings, the findings I haven’t told anyone, not Professor Gander, not the cops, not Conway.

Molly Lindstrom's parents remind me of mine, except a bunch richer. Their house is in a gated neighborhood amid carefully manicured forestland outside of Seattle. Burt Lindstrom made his dough in the engineering division of a certain well-known aerospace company. His is a precise and austere mind. Wouldn't know it from the décor. Antique hunting rifles, swords, and moose-heads on the walls and nothing to do with aviation or aviators. He favors red and black checked plaids, denim pants, and logging boots. Makes Lee Marvin seem soft and cuddly in comparison. His wife, Margaret, a former bathing beauty, has gone thick in the middle. She's in a dress, a blue one. Her eyes are cruel as a bird's.

Their guard, a goon named Larry, stands at the window. He's peering through binoculars back the way I drove in. "Brown sedan, last year's model. Just pulled a U-turn outside the gate. Two guys." He keeps on scanning with the binoculars. His lips move silently. He's got a gun slung under his ugly tweed jacket.

I'd seen the car on the highway, trying to blend with traffic and not quite making it.

"That'll be the feds," Mr. Lindstrom says to the goon while he stares at the brand-spanking new scars on my cheeks where the frostbite laid its brand. "Got you on a short leash, huh? They reckon you kilt that man of theirs. Left him on the ice. I gotta buck says you did. Kind of hombre you are."

Parker's white smile flickers in my mind. "I didn't kill him," I say with real weariness. It's the hundredth-and first time I've said the words.

"And I don't give a shit," says Mr. Lindstrom.

"A drink?" Mrs. Lindstrom is already gliding toward the liquor cabinet. She's got the grace of a magician's assistant. Lickety-split, hubby and I are each clutching a scotch and soda in front of the hearth. There's a fire in there. I'm sweating in the nice suit Conway made me wear, but frozen at the core. After Alaska, nothing will ever warm me up again.

She says to him, sweet as pie, "Civility, Burt. We agreed how you'd be." Those eyes again. I wouldn't want to be trapped on a lee shore with her and no supplies.

He smiles like you do when you get punched in the balls. "Sure, hon. How's the booze, Cope? Fix you another?"

“No, sir. I’m fine.” I’m not fine. I’m minus a leg and I use a cane and I’ve gone from recreational drinker to hardened drunk.

“Gander says you have something for us. You met Smyth.” Mr. Lindstrom’s mouth twists and he visibly restrains himself, turns away and says to the goon, “Get some air, Larry.” The goon makes himself scarce.

Mrs. Lindstrom moves close to me. I doubt there’s much contact between her and the husband, and she’s starved. She smells bitter, like winter flowers. “He told you about my daughter?”

I nod and sip scotch.

“You anglin’ for more cash?” He gives a snort of contempt. “I’ll write you a damned check on the spot. Out with it, man!”

“Easy, dear, easy,” she says to her husband. Then to me, “We saw the film, Mr. Cope. There isn’t anything you can say that will shock us. All we want is a little peace. Her marker is over an empty plot. I can’t bear it anymore.”

He drains his glass, seems poised to chuck it at the fire. “She had a bit part. Basically an extra, for Chrissake. Bride of Dracula Number Three. So what? Those rat bastard producers seduced her. Smyth sold her a bill of goods how he was gonna make her the next Monroe. Molly was a good girl. She mixed with bad people.” He runs out of steam and stares dumbly into the distance.

“No argument here,” I say. Bride of Dracula Number Three took it in the ass on screen, and did some other naughty stuff too. Not mine to judge. I steel myself. “Molly’s dead, ma’am. She died ten years ago in Los Angeles. Remember when Mr. Lindstrom flew to LA to help the private dick he’d hired to search? Well, he and this lowlife named Brent Williams found her all right, shacked up with a hood from the projects, strung out on heroin and hooking for rent money. *Ardor* ruined her. Ruined her in every way you can imagine. There was an argument. Your husband killed her and the pimp in a twenty-dollar-a-night motel room. It was an accident, everything simply got out of hand. The dick got rid of the bodies himself.” I stare at her, try to project compassion at her blank, shocked face. “It was you who hired me, isn’t that right, ma’am? Your husband signed the check, but it was you, because you couldn’t have known, and he went along, played the part of the

grieving dad. And I guess maybe you *are* grieving, Mr. Lindstrom. Maybe you're sorry for what you've done."

Nobody says anything for a bit. Then Mrs. Lindstrom bursts into tears and flees the room, face buried in her hands.

"You bastard," Mr. Lindstrom says and shakes his head the way a confused bear might. "You come in here and make my wife cry? Bad mistake, son." He takes a knife from his pocket. A big one with a fixed blade that would've done nicely as a bayonet.

The guard confiscated my piece when I came onto the property. That's why I'm standing next to a pair of crossed cavalry sabers. I hope against hope they're sharp—

—Smyth wrote this in one of his abandoned journals*: As a boy I started with bugs and small animals. I accidentally clipped the end of my index finger off at age sixteen while stacking chairs in the school gymnasium. It completely repaired itself within two and half years. Spontaneous regeneration. This was long before I discovered the Bluefield papers. Bluefield was a crank living in the wrong century. Still, his instincts were true. After my last film with Lewton I visited Borneo on holiday and trekked into the brush, learning the old ways. I ate a fresh human heart. The hetman of a friendly tribe told me I'd inherit the strength and the vigor of the fallen warrior. It tasted sweet. There's no returning from that. Sadly, it's only part of the secret. The keyhole you peer through. The dark mystery itself is unapproachable*.—

—Parker is still ticking, still got some fight in him. He's missing some pieces, so not *that* much fight. He says to me in a tired voice, "I suppose the fact your grandfather was a gangster makes us meeting like this sort of poetic."

"You say poetic, I say pathetic. Wait a second. You're a cop?" I mug at him, best as I am able. He smiles weakly. I'm groggy. Haven't had a sip of water in hours. Two days since I last ate. The tips of my fingers and toes are numb and my heart knocks too fast. I'm bruised, possibly concussed. My back is sprained, and worst of all, my left thigh has suffered a severe laceration. None of this bodes well.

Beyond this litany of woes looms a bigger problem.

The others have bled out on the ice floor of the crystal cave. All that life coagulated into a crimson slick. The enormous cascade of blood is too hot to completely freeze. It oozes toward the hole in the floor. The pit that has awaited us for a million years.

Parker and I cling to a rough section a few feet upslope. We've linked arms and combined our waning strength. The ice is damp and slippery. Inch by inch our purchase loosens and we slide toward doom.

The man who once played Renfield on the silver screen throws back the hood of his bearskin parka and laughs. His hands are bare to the elements, fingernails blackened or gone. I try not to consider what he's done, what he's going to do.

He says, "The tragedy is that the Renfield figure wants what the master already has. Immortality. After all my searching, all my supplication, all my obeisance, I have found only a slower way of dying."

The walls of ice molt crimson. They seep and drip.

My grip fails. Parker groans and slides past me, down the bloody ice chute into the shaft that probably goes straight past Hell to China. The groan is merely a sound he's making. It doesn't touch his eyes. I'll never get to ask him if he'd gone undercover to bust me or to get a line on Smyth, that alleged murderer of starlets.

A moment later I'm gone too and Smyth whistles to mock my departure—

—And then I die—

—Maybe an eon passed in the void. How would I know? Mostly I spent the time falling like a stone into an abyss. There were interludes when I segued from falling into walking through a vast maze, a hedgerow of obsidian. The sky was also obsidian splintered by jags of white light. The light was so dim and so far away it might've been the inverse of itself. Figures moved in the distance. Moses and Maddox. I couldn't quite catch them to see for certain. Parker paced me by trudging backwards. A bit green around the gills and sickly pale. Breathing, though. I cried out to him and he smiled and drifted away.

Sometimes Smyth's disembodied voice echoed along the twists and turns. "I didn't travel into the wilderness to find the dark. I brought the dark with

me. The seed is inside everybody, waiting for a chance."

Another occasion he said, "I went out there to be alone. You got what you wanted, you stupid twit?"

I realized I was probably talking to myself and in those moments of clarity the maze disintegrated and I'd be lying in that grave on the ice between my comrades, or plummeting from the sky in the plane, or kissing Conway at the Phoenix Theatre, or transfixed in a study while *Ardor* squelched and squealed on the wall and stodgy guests gawked at my apparition.

In every case the snow returns, and covers me—

—I wake in the summer to a good morning blowjob, but the ruined nerves in my remaining leg kill me and the vertigo unmans me and I scream and Conway has to hold me down until I stop. I lie there in a sweat and tell him the fog has lifted. I remember everything in Technicolor.

He cautions that I can't trust my recollections, claims I returned to Seattle a night before I ever left and then blinks and says he didn't say anything that crazy. He leaves red marker messages on the mirror: *Where's her body, Sam?* I confront him and he kisses my ear and says I didn't get eaten by the Ouroboros and shit out into an alternate universe. Take your meds and do your physical therapy, Sam. Where's her body, Sam? Where's Parker's body? Where are they, Sam?

If I didn't die, if this isn't Hell, then what has actually transpired is worse. Always something worse. That first night in the storm does for Moses, his fabulous parka notwithstanding. Maddox may or may not have had life in him. Parker is only strong enough to tow one of us and despite my length, I don't weigh much. The good cop drags me back to the seashore and we await rescue near the plane's wreckage. Along the way a diamond-hard sliver of ice or a jagged rock has torn through my overalls and sliced my thigh to the bone. I don't feel it happen and the blood covers my legs like I've a lap full of rubies. We hunker for two days. Parker's face turns black and his eyes go milky blue. He stays with me a while, and then between buffets from the north wind he's gone.

The troopers are able to dig Pilot John's remains from the barbeque pit. They are mystified at the bullet hole in his skull. Bits of glass in there, so the bullet was fired from the ground as he banked the plane for a pass is

what they conclude. Helicopter rides, hospital wards, a long white veil over the universe come next. Ice covers the Earth, then recedes and reveals the green. I'll never walk quite right again. I lose an ear, a leg, all my fingernails, my belief in the rational, my sanity.

Night after night I dream of *Ardor* and Renfield in his cell with worms, lice, and flies for sustenance. He gibbers and hoots until the Count slips into his cell and maims him, leaves him paralyzed in the shitty rags of his bedding. I follow the camera into his glazed eyeball and come out on the other side inside a cheap motel room in Van Nuys. I'm a fly on the wall during the encounter between Papa Lindstrom and his private dick and Molly Lindstrom. The shouts and the tears are flowing freely when the pimp walks in. Bullets don't have names on them. The girl and the pimp get bundled into the dick's Caddy for a long, lonely ride to the landfill.

I don't have a shred of proof, but the fucking imagery is so vivid, eventually it eats away at me, plagues my waking hours. Lately, I'm convinced that nothing is real, so the unreality of this scenario assumes the same weight as anything else. Conway helps me into the suit I usually wear to funerals and drives me to the Lindstrom estate. I leave him in the car, tell him it won't be fifteen minutes and then I hobble inside to say the awful things I've got say.

Here's the test. Here's where I receive validation or comeuppance. Maybe it'll be both. For a moment I hesitate on the steps while a goon named Larry approaches. It is lush and green and sweetly humid. Not a glacier in sight—

—Lindstrom charges me with the knife brandished. I'm a step ahead of the game. I drop my cane and snatch the cavalry saber from its ornamental wall hooks. Coming in I'd expected mockery, perhaps indignant outrage, the threat of arrest, and certainly the risk of getting roughed up by one of the old man's goons. Hell, if they'd simply laughed and phoned the funny farm, it wouldn't have surprised me. What I didn't account for was how fast the situation escalates into a killing. In retrospect, I can't blame myself for not entirely buying that the dreams were bona fide. Crazy people believe their own bullshit and so forth.

The snarl, the savage glint in his eyes, this is the murder in L.A. reprised. Man, it's not as if I'm a fencer, or anything. I make a haphazard swing

when he gets close and there goes the knife and two of his fingers under a table. Unfortunately for both of us he doesn't take a hint. He leans down and retrieves the knife with his left hand and I hobble forward two steps and swipe at him again, both hands wrapped around the hilt. The sword cleaves through his neck without any trouble and his head plops onto the Persian rug and rolls onto its side so those devil-dog eyes are blinking at me.

"Oh, shit," I say.

The wife doesn't return and there's a hell of a mess in the parlor, so I leave. The goon doesn't intercept me on my way out the door. I do a spot check of my reflection at the car and don't see any blood on my suit. My hair is mussed and I'm sweating, but that's me these days. I smile at Conway and tell him to take us home. He doesn't suspect anything and I retreat into myself with alacrity. My brain wants to shutter the doors and call it a day. I roll down the window and breathe in the smells of grass and leaves.

A cloud swoops in and paces the car. The breeze gains an edge and snow begins to fall. My heart stops. But it's not snow, it is hail and Conway hits the wipers and in a minute or two we're through it and gliding beneath glorious blue skies. I place my hand over Conway's and close my eyes and try not to make that transcendental journey to Alaska, or visualize Lindstrom's mouth working up a voiceless curse.

I figure if this isn't a dream, the cops will be waiting at the house. And they are.

Man With No Name

This version taken from the novella *Man With No Name*, 2016
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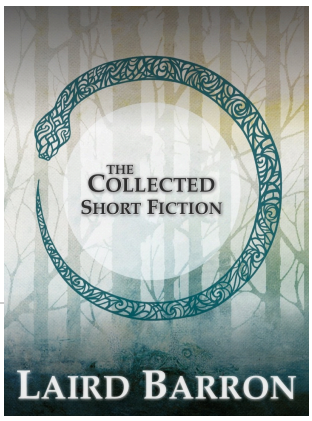

Part One
The Night Birds

Nanashi dreamed he lay upon a reed mat in a strange place, dreaming of flying through darkness. Wind pushed in against the walls; it masked the cries of night birds. People had come with him, although he couldn't remember who. Childhood friends, business associates, it was unclear. He woke within the dream to splashing, the gurgle of water through pipes, and sat upright, convulsed with fear. The others were gone. He walked from the room and along a narrow corridor lit by a yellow glow. A breeze ruffled paper streamers and caught his vaporous breath. He was naked and he carried a revolver in his left hand.

At the end of the hallway was an arch, and through the arch the air dimmed from yellow to an undersea green. The splashing grew loud. He crossed over into a chamber hewn from rock. The chamber oozed steam—the steam wormed its way into his nose and tasted of copper and smog. Condensation dripped from the rugged ceiling into a large, deep pool. Paper lanterns bobbed on the water. This was an old and sacred place.

An attractive foreign woman, pale and blonde, stood in the way. Her kimono glowed silver and blue and white as the light shifted. Her blue and black flecked eyes were not downcast; they focused sharply upon Nanashi's face. Her lips were painted red or black. She shook her head once in warning and stepped aside, was absorbed by the shadows of the cave.

A thick, powerful man squatted at the edge of the pool, his hairy back to Nanashi. His shoulders bunched and flexed, deformed in their pronounced development, and Nanashi thought for a moment of a washerwoman he'd seen at a riverbank, patiently wringing her laundry. Clothes had been flung

everywhere, cast off with apparent abandon. He recognized the fancy jackets and designer shoes. They belonged to his brothers in arms, the members of his clan.

The man began to whistle. His position concealed his work, but there was no mistaking the fact he gripped someone's jittering ankle, inverting it above the water while pressing down with his opposite hand. The splashing and thrashing weakened. Nanashi swung his head to the left, and saw then a sodden white mound of disjointed limbs, still quivering. He raised the pistol with impossible slowness, as though gravity had tripled.

The man looked over his shoulder. His face was the Devil's. "You're awake."

Nanashi pulled the trigger again and again. Impotent sparks shot from the barrel. The revolver didn't kick; it made no sound. Of course it had no effect.

Nanashi never made it home from closing down the disco with clan brothers Amida and Haru. He wasn't drinking anything stronger than coffee; his chore for the evening being that of watchdog and shepherd to his comrades. A waiter hurried to their table and informed them of a call, carefully ignoring the unconscious party girls, the wasteland of overturned bottles and shot glasses. Nanashi made his way to the house phone. Older Brother Koma was on the other end. He said they were to meet at The Palace of the Sunfish in an hour. He hung up.

"Screw him," said Amida upon hearing of the summons. He spoke without opening his eyes.

"I need another drink. Nanashi, ask the guy to bring me a beer, okay?" Haru slumped on a couch, a snoring girl in a wrinkled dress flopped across his chest. Haru did not sound as if he needed another beer.

Nanashi wanted to call Yuki, but was afraid to wake her. She worked the nightshift as a cocktail waitress at another club. He imagined her fumbling around the apartment, sluggish with exhaustion, leaving a trail of shoes, hose, her skirt and panties hanging from a chair; he saw her through the

frosted glass of the shower, lathering herself, then in bed, damp hair over her cheek as daylight crept through the blinds. She slept naked.

He sighed and herded his associates out of the club, ignoring their clamoring and protestations. Long ago, Nanashi learned to “do as Family say.” It was that simple. He’d only argued against the wisdom of his elders once. They made Nanashi chop off his little finger at the second knuckle as a reminder. *One down, one to go*, joked Uncle Kojima. He had kept Nanashi’s pinky in a jar of formaldehyde with those of other transgressors. A floating white garden.

And as for Nanashi, the boys hustled him across town to Doctor Yee’s office and had him fitted for a nice, snug prosthetic. He tapped his fake pinky against the rim of his glass of tea, dropped it in the pocket of his nightshirt when he slept. Chewed it when he was bored.

Sworn Father Kojima was dead and Nanashi couldn’t bring himself to wax sentimental. Too bad new boss, Uncle Yutaka, was an even bigger prick than the old boss.

While their fellow gangsters waited around the lobby of The Palace of the Sunfish, Koma took Nanashi and Amida to meet with Uncle Yutaka in the Gold Room. It was evidently a momentous occasion for Koma. He’d been surlier than normal. Sweat poured from him and a blister swelled on his lip; a sure sign of nerves. Everyone must be on their best behavior when Father arrived! Uncle Yutaka was number three in the Heron syndicate. Only the Chairman, their esteemed Father Akima, and his major domo were more powerful and they left everything up to Yutaka these days. Nanashi once heard Koma was afraid Uncle Yutaka didn’t like him. From what Nanashi knew of Uncle Yutaka, he figured Koma’s fear was reasonable.

Uncle Yutaka was old and fat. He wore amber-tinted shooting glasses and an ice water-blue suit from the 1960s. Heavily influenced by the James Bond movies of that era, he’d bankrolled a series of straight to video Tokyo and Hong Kong spy flicks, had established himself as a poor man’s Albert Broccoli. His teeth were made of porcelain and his shaky hands were spackled with liver spots. He’d been to the hospital for three heart

operations in the past five years. Haru claimed their uncle's heart was monitored by a pacemaker, but nobody knew for certain.

Uncle Yutaka enjoyed foreign cigarettes. He especially preferred Camels and Pall Malls, Benson & Hedges, and vintage brands like Lucky Strike. Everybody brought him cigarettes when they returned from travels abroad; it had become a minor contest between the brothers of the Heron to see whose exotic smokes Uncle would favor during his weekly audiences at the Palace of the Sunfish. Uncle smoked palm out and vented the exhaust from the sides of his mouth. Yutaka's tinted glasses pointed dead ahead and fooled most of the gang, but Nanashi caught Uncle watching him from the corners of his eyes. Uncle's eyes were yellow and pink and small like the eyes of a Komodo.

Nanashi hadn't been following the conversation, he never did; instead, he'd rolled up his sleeve and stuck his arm into the fish tank, patiently attempting to snag one of the snappers creeping in its depths. The weight of Uncle Yutaka's cold, reptilian appraisal made him nervous and fidgety. He churned the water and the fish scattered.

"No, no, Uncle. He's just a bit… distractible, is all." Koma stood at Uncle Yutaka's shoulder. His head was large and it sat directly on the wide collar of his canary-yellow suit. Uncle Yutaka was seated at his customary table with his cronies Ichiban and Akio, both of whom were old and withered, too shrunken for their antique suits and fedoras. They were sipping scotch and smoking lots of cigarettes. The air around them was blue and foul and made them seem to float. "He's an orphan. Uncle Kojima got him from—Brother Amida, where did we find Nanashi?

"Kyoto," Amida said. "Drunk behind a garbage can." He casually guarded the entrance to the Gold Room. He was tall and lean and dressed in a sharp red blazer with cool black shades hanging from the breast pocket.

Koma said, "He used to drink a lot. A lot, a lot. He's much better now."

"Nanashi? What the shit kind of name is that?"

"It's just what everyone calls him," Koma said.

Nanashi's photo identification and birth certificate called him something else. However, those papers had been forged by yakuza agents in the government. Nanashi himself had purposefully buried his true name. His

memories of childhood and youth prior to the blurred darkness of a years-long drunk were fragmentary and best forgotten.

Uncle Yutaka grunted. Smoke curled from his nostrils. “Kojima recruited him? Why on earth?” he said, as if it had never occurred to him before that moment.

“Who knows?” Koma said. “Uncle Kojima was inscrutable.”

“Huh,” Uncle Yutaka said. “Koma, I need to speak with you.” That was the hint to clear out, so everyone except for Koma immediately filed from the room.

They stood around smoking and comparing cell phones until Koma rejoined them a few minutes later. He said, “We’ve been ordered to pick up Muzaki. We’ll do it tomorrow at the Fighting Dog.”

“THE Muzaki? The wrestler?” Haru’s eyes bulged.

“Don’t get so excited. He’s a has-been.”

“Muzaki belongs to the Dragon. Why are we screwing with him?”

“Because Uncle says so, that’s why.”

“Yeah, but what for?”

“The guns we lost. The truck hijackings in the north. The plunger up that one brother’s ass at the train station last year.”

“The Dragons were behind all that? So, we take their mascot for revenge.”

“Not revenge,” Koma said. “Leverage. The Dragon repays us, or else. I think those assholes value him a great deal.”

“Well, he’s famous,” Amida said, not that it needed saying. “And his nightclubs are excellent. Muzaki is a very respectable businessman. The Americans love him.”

“*He’s* American as far as I’m concerned,” Haru said.

“Fuck them. I don’t care. I’ll pick you up in the morning.”

“Does the Chairman know about this?” Nanashi had his suspicions on that score. The Yokohama bosses weren’t supposed to do anything on this kind of scale the old men in Tokyo didn’t approve first.

“It’s between Heron and Dragon. Nobody in Tokyo needs to know nothing.”

Koma swung by Nanashi’s place the next morning in the long cobalt Cadillac his father shipped from Detroit as a coming of age present. Koma wore a lemon suit and a fancy wide-brimmed lemon hat that scraped the roof of the cab. Amida and Haru were in the backseat looking bored. As Koma drove, he mentioned a couple of brothers would meet them at the gym in a second car. Nanashi asked who Koma had called in. Koma said he hadn’t called anybody, it was Uncle Nobukazu’s order. Mizo and Jiki would be waiting at the gym in the second car was all Koma knew.

Mizo and Jiki? Nanashi shook his head in disgust. The Terrible Two were crazy. They were liable to do anything and answered to no one except Uncle Yutaka or Uncle Nobukazu, the latter of whom had rescued the men from an institution for the criminally deranged. Nanashi didn’t trust Uncle Nobukazu’s judgment. It was commonly known he’d acquired syphilis from some party girl and it was busily eating his brain.

Some speculated that Mizo and Jiki were twins, although Amida laconically pointed out that, “everybody with Down Syndrome looked alike” and no one could argue the point.

Nanashi lighted a cigarette and tried not to worry. He started to roll down the window, but the cab was already cloudy with blue smoke, so he didn’t bother. He stared at the passing shop fronts as they declined and aged and gave way to impoverished warehouses and garages and self storage buildings.

Jiki and Mizo waited across the street from the gym in a parking lot. Both of them were fairly large and vaguely retarded. They eschewed the handsome suits of their more conservative yakuza brethren, or even the audacious pimp-suit stylings of new wave gangsters like Koma and his ilk, preferring pastel cargo pants and baggy, sleeveless tee shirts from Hong Kong outlet malls. Loose, formless clothing was just the thing for impromptu gang fights and scaling fences when fleeing the law. Nobody bothered to give them shit for violating the dress code.

Koma cruised alongside the duo, who were methodically thrashing a pair of high school kids. Everyone climbed out of the Cadillac and stood around to watch the action.

"Good morning, brothers," Mizo said as he cheerfully pressed his foot on the neck of a struggling youth. Jiki had thrown another boy facedown across the hood of the Honda. This kid wasn't moving, although he groaned occasionally. Jiki paused his search of the kid's pockets to wave at Koma. Nanashi guessed the kids were local dealers. Several foil packets and baggies were lined up on the hood, evidently confiscated by Jiki and Mizo.

"Yo," Mizo said to Nanashi and grinned. His mouth was crammed with silver braces. He worshipped at the altars of American hip-hop and gangster rap. "Hey, Nanashi, how's that sweet sister of yours, huh?"

Nanashi looked at him. He'd broken Mizo's foot when the hoodlum first joined the clan. Nanashi still drank at that point in his career and Mizo unwisely shot off his mouth. So Nanashi stomped his instep and then threw him over the balcony of the club they were partying at. It was a lazy attempt at a killing and Nanashi was much better when he so wished. Lucky for Mizo, the balcony was only a few feet above some hedges. He screeched and wailed all the way to the hospital. Everybody made fun of him for months until he got out of the cast and stopped limping.

"What the hell are you doing with these punks?" Koma said to Mizo. "Quit screwing the dog. We've got serious business."

"Very serious business," Jiki said. His laughter emerged as maniacal wheezing. As stupid as Jiki was, it could be difficult to tell if he was mocking Koma or agreeing with him. He slapped his victim on the buttocks and told him to get going. The kid was off like a shot.

Mizo sighed theatrically and took his foot off the neck of the other kid and let him run away. "Look at what those assholes tried to do! Look at this shit! They were trying to shortchange us. You don't mess with the yakuza. We *had* to beat them up." He swept the drug paraphernalia into his upended baseball cap and tossed the works into the Honda. "Okay. Ready to go."

"Is he here?" Nanashi said to Koma.

"Who? Muzaki?"

“Yeah.”

“He’s here. We got a guy inside. He called me on the way to your place. We’re good, no need to worry.”

The Fighting Dog was a house made of concrete blocks and sheet metal decorated by slashes of red and purple spray paint. The gym lay partially sunken beneath street level and despite its mean exterior and lousy accommodations, it remained one of the preeminent training facilities in the whole of Japan. Like the analogue four star hotels which hosted statesmen, movie stars, and emperors, in its forty years of history the Fighting Dog had served as training ground for scores of champion wrestlers, boxers, and martial artists. Nanashi thought it was definitely the kind of place where one might get one’s ass kicked without much ceremony.

Muzaki was simply Muzaki, like Madonna and Sting. His legal name was Wesley Hallecker, born in Chicago in 1947. His father was an American businessman, his mother the youngest daughter of a doctor who’d maintained a practice in Kobe. Muzaki lived between the US and Japan until he graduated from Penn State. He eventually settled in Yokohama and became one of Japan’s great wrestlers. Ever the crowd favorite for his phenomenal prowess and superhuman might, he’d also shrewdly concocted a personal mythology, a backstory that was the precursor to modern professional storylines in professional wrestling that included comic book personas with elaborately cartoonish biographies. Muzaki’s own heroic tale claimed that he’d survived a shipwreck in the South Seas as a toddler and was subsequently raised by a lost tribe that ruled a chain of small, uncharted islands. This tribe allegedly practiced black magic and shrunk the heads of its enemies after drinking their blood and devouring their hearts. Muzaki was trained as a slayer of beasts and his exploits in the south were much celebrated until he was captured by men on a passing whaler and returned to civilization whereupon the government spent much time and effort rehabilitating him.

The fans loved it.

Father to numerous children, he’d married several times, most recently to a much younger American woman, an actress named Susan Stucky who hadn’t acted in half a decade. An odd couple to be sure. The tabloids

claimed they'd met when he rescued her from drowning at a casting party in Beverly Hills. She was floating face down near the bottom of a swimming pool and he'd dragged her out and revived her.

Everybody knew Muzaki the way everybody knew Ali or Pele. He was an institution and unlike a lot of other superstar athletes, he'd managed his money wisely and retired a wealthy man. He'd opened a chain of mixed martial arts gymnasiums, sporting goods stores, and invested in numerous nightclubs and warehouse properties. Muzaki's greatest and worst kept secret to financial success was his affiliation with the Dragon syndicate, number one rival of the Heron Clan. Muzaki, despite his waning celebrity, remained a sentimental investment of Miyami Tanaka, the Dragons' inestimable socho.

"Wait here," Nanashi said at the door, nodding at the crazy brothers. "Both of you."

"Huh?" Mizo thrust his chin forward. "Uncle Nobukazu said—"

"Wait here and watch the door."

"Why?" said Jiki.

"Because somebody has to do it."

"You watch the door, then."

"Shut up and watch the door," Koma said.

"What for?"

"Keep a lookout in case Tanaka's boys show up or something," Koma said. Of course, a bunch of Tanaka's boys could already be inside since the gym was a favorite hangout of Dragon foot soldiers, many of whom worshipped Muzaki like a god.

Jiki didn't say anything, just folded his arms in sullen resignation. Mizo rubbed his mouth. His cheeks became red. "Me and Jiki didn't come here to stand around while you guys—"

"Shut up," Koma said. He brushed past and went inside.

Muzaki stood to greet Koma. They shook hands and exchanged pleasantries and Muzaki introduced the other men at the table—a fight promoter, a lawyer, and a couple of trainers; nobody of importance. Nanashi

hung back and watched them. He recognized Muzaki from the pictures and the old fight clips. The old man had gone to seed, but remained an impressive figure nonetheless. Squat as a fireplug, yet inordinately broad, his knuckles brushed his knees. There was a whole lot of muscle under all that flab. Koma, who'd grown rather stout himself, resembled a child by comparison.

Haru and Amida sidled next to Nanashi.

Haru said with the corner of his mouth, "You ever see his wife? The American? Oh boy. Oh man."

"The actress?" Amida said. "She's dead."

"No, she's alive. Susan something. Susan Stucky."

"Well, she doesn't act anymore. What was she in?"

"Lots of things."

"Yeah, but there was that one flick. Damn it, what was it called?"

"The gangster movie? The one where the Mafia blew her up on the yacht? There's a tragedy. What a waste. That two piece white bikini she ran around in almost gave me a heart attack."

"She was an ice bitch."

"Oh yeah. Oh boy."

"That big ugly bastard is hitting that? I am in the wrong business."

Muzaki swiveled his lumpy head their direction as if he'd caught their whispers.

"Man, he's big," Amida said. "My father swore he was in Osaka the night Muzaki broke Ostreshinger's back. I wonder if I can get his autograph."

"Sure you can," Haru said. "Didn't he kill the German? I thought he did. It was in the papers."

"No, no. Muzaki just hurt him. Ostreshinger was in a wheelchair for a few years. He died in a home. Respiratory failure."

"Exactly. Which was courtesy of Muzaki fucking him up, right? So, Muzaki killed him."

“If you look at it that way, yeah. Muzaki killed the shit out of that German. Kind of sad. If he hadn’t killed the guy, he probably wouldn’t have retired so soon after.”

“You think Muzaki retired because he felt guilty over what happened?” Haru shook his head. “No way. Who cares what happens to one of those bastards? It was business. Muzaki got out because he was becoming a slob. Look at him over there.”

“I’m looking, believe me. How are we gonna get him in the car?”

“It’s not like we’re gonna stuff him in the trunk.”

“We’re not? Oh, good.”

“Anyway, we got an axe.”

In the end Muzaki smiled hugely and came along, docile as could be. Nanashi, whose job description included fretting over such details, didn’t like it at all.

Koma drove inland. The day was bright and warm. Nanashi sat on the front passenger side, angled so he could see the rearview mirror. Haru and Muzaki sat in back. Mizo, Jiki, and Amida paced them in the second car.

“Is it far?” Muzaki said as the city eventually dropped from sight behind them and they crossed mile after mile of rice and bean fields. “If it’s far, you should know I’ve got a kidney problem.” He shifted his bulk uncomfortably.

“It’s far,” Koma said. He drove fast, pedal to the floorboard when traffic allowed. Koma was a formula car nut. He seemed to think he’d watched enough grand prixs to drive like Hakkinen or Schumacher.

“Ah. About my kidneys—”

“You can go in this,” Koma said, swishing the remnants of a liter bottle of cola.

“Don’t worry, Muzaki-san,” Haru said. “We’ll stop along the way. Koma has his own kidney problems and there’s only one bottle, right?”

“I should’ve made you ride with the mongoloid twins,” Koma said. “Let’s have some music.” He turned on the radio and began fiddling with the dial.

A black cloud swooped in directly overhead and blocked out the sun. Rain pinged from the windows and obliterated the highway markings.

“Haru says you are a fighter,” Muzaki said.

“Eh? Me?” Nanashi startled, realizing the big man was speaking to him. “Not really. I’m too old.”

“Too old?”

“I’m thirty-three.”

“That isn’t so bad. Not if you’re tough.”

“When I was a boy I trained in a dojo, that’s all.”

They regarded each other in the mirror. Muzaki’s features were brutish and scarred. His skull was shaped like an anvil. His ears had contracted to small, fleshy knobs. His nose was a deflated bump of impacted cartilage. He reached forward and grasped Nanashi’s shoulder and squeezed. The power in his hand was enough to make Nanashi queasy.

Muzaki said, “But you still train. You’re built like a good, sturdy light-heavyweight. You’ve never been in the ring?”

“No. I trained for… habit, I guess.” Nanashi lit another cigarette to cover his unease. He’d seen enough clips of Muzaki strangling his hapless foes. Muzaki was famous for hip throws and sleeper holds. “The Savage” had been one of his many ring names. He’d dressed in bear skins, on occasion. Real skins.

“Habit?” Muzaki settled and the entire rear seat creaked beneath his weight. “May I have a cigarette?”

“Say, Muzaki-san, have one of my mine.” Haru reached inside his coat.

“No, thank you. Nanashi?”

Nanashi turned awkwardly in his seat and handed Muzaki a cigarette. Haru quickly lighted it for Muzaki.

“Thank you.” Muzaki coughed a bit. “Ack. It’s been years since I smoked one of these.

“Why start up again?” Nanashi said.

“Isn’t it tradition for the condemned to get a last cigarette?”

“Don’t be so melancholy,” Koma said. “We’re just going for a ride. Jesus.”

“Yes. Where is this place, again?”

“Inland,” Koma gestured vaguely.

“Inland…” Muzaki nodded to himself.

“In the mountains. We’ll stay at the lodge tonight.”

“Oh?”

“You’ll enjoy it,” Haru said. “It’s nice. I take Koma’s girlfriend there all the time.”

“Hey! Watch your mouth!” Koma said over his shoulder and almost swerved into the ditch. Haru chuckled and slipped a set of headphones over his ears.

A chill crept into the car despite their mingled breath and cigarette smoke. Cold air rushed through the vent and over Nanashi’s knees. They glided among hills. Every piece of landscape lay abstracted by water rushing over the windshield. Koma engaged the headlights and it was as if they were driving into an endless tunnel. Nanashi remembered killing ants as a boy with his brother’s Swiss Army knife—first with the magnifying glass, then the blade. He’d poured water into their nests, watched black torrents of workers and soldiers tumbling in the rivulets. He envisioned God’s thumb poised over the Cadillac.

Late in the afternoon, they left the highway and followed a single lane along a fast-moving stream that had carved a gorge of black stones and flint-ribbed cliffs over the aeons. Rushes swirled along the cut-banks where the churn and froth subsided to misty vapor. Bamboo trees swayed, and the shadows of bamboo trees swayed also, and when Koma stopped the car so Haru could snap a few photographs of the waterfalls, Nanashi went to the edge of the road and stared down into the gulf of trees and bushes and rocks. The rain had slackened to a drizzle. His hair hung lank across his eyes; his tie drooped, a sodden cord.

Birds called angrily from the forest depths. Or ghosts made angry bird cries from the forest depths, urging trespassers to turn away, to make for the well-traveled roads, the safety of highway markings, telephone poles and

lights, the comfort of multitudes. Nanashi had come here once before in the tenure of Uncle Kojima, had stood in this very spot on the crumbling precipice while his brethren took photos and smoked cigarettes and passed around hip flasks of brandy, and he'd listened to the strange arboreal chorus. He thought this time there were more voices out there among the trees. He tapped his prosthesis against his silver eyetooth.

The lodge itself crowded the summit of a butte overlooking the upper falls of the gorge. Matasui Hot Springs was an amalgam of old eastern pagoda and Nineteenth Century French chalet; very rustic and very exclusive. The parking lot notched the hillside; a rusty guardrail demarcated a sheer drop of at least sixty meters. Theirs were the only vehicles in the lot.

Mossy flagstone steps made a series of switchbacks up to the main building. The seven went single file, Nanashi at the rear. He gripped the slick wooden rail and scanned the road until it dwindled far below into the misty woods. He didn't think they'd been followed, but it paid to be cautious. Powerful forces surrounded Muzaki, after all.

Nanashi disliked the proprietors, an obsequious, elderly couple from Tokyo. The couple presided at the front door with a contingent of young men who fought amongst themselves over a handful of valises and overnight bags the Herons had brought along. Nanashi overheard Haru explain to Muzaki that the Herons owned a significant stake in the lodge. The details were cloudy; Nanashi knew the establishment made a nice honest front for the syndicate, and a terrific place for the bosses to relax and conduct business far from prying eyes in the city. Indeed, the city literally crawled with spies; they scuttled in every nook and cranny, *like cockroaches*, as Uncle Kojima had said a dozen times a day. He'd been right, too. Old, stately Kojima, collector of walking canes, fingers, and women—shot ninety-six times by a pair of goons wielding Chinese submachine guns, right there in his own satin sheets on his own enormous bed. What an ignominious end for a modern day warlord.

The twins were given custody of Muzaki. They flanked him like attack dogs while he inspected the rather expansive foyer as it opened into a common room decorated with plush furniture, bamboo pots, and a stone

fireplace already crackling behind ornamental grates. Here and there were marble lamps and apparently authentic statuary (arms and heads were broken off!), and on a carpeted dais, a baby grand piano gleamed like a piece of black ivory. A long, shiny bar formed an L near sliding doors that led onto a patio, which extended beyond the cliff and into open space. Of course, Koma, Amida, and Haru made directly for the bar where a tall, bald man in a silk shirt and suspenders was already lining the counter with shots of whiskey.

Nanashi stepped out to make a brief tour of the grounds. He followed the crushed stone path around the perimeter of the lodge and several outbuildings. These latter were private bungalows, and all appeared empty, their doors locked and windows shuttered. He peered through the glass, and was greeted by darkness and silence. Behind the central building was a storage shed and a low timber building that snugged into the hill. A sign on the door marked it as the bath house. More paths spiraled from the central axis into the shrubbery. It was rapidly becoming too dim to appraise the situation much further, so he went inside. He selected a table adjacent the terrace and told the unctuous proprietor, who'd slithered over with a bottle and glasses, to away with the booze and fetch him green tea and honey. His companions were enjoying themselves immensely—they clustered around Muzaki, who seemed to be involved in teaching them a card trick, or passing around a wallet photograph.

A few minutes later, Jiki and Mizo came over, their captive in tow. "Hey, you watch this guy for a while," Jiki said, pointing to Muzaki.

"Yeah," Mizo said. "We're going to get wasted."

Muzaki settled his hulk across from Nanashi. He smiled, cave-like.

The proprietor returned with tea and poured it for Nanashi and Muzaki and hung around rubbing his hands together entirely too long until Nanashi drew his revolver from its shoulder holster and set it on the table. The proprietor went away.

"So." Muzaki sipped his tea. "We wait."

Nanashi nodded. He holstered the gun and smoothed his wet hair against his skull.

Darkness slipped over the land. The rain was back and it had brought the wind. He shivered despite the warmth of the lodge. The guffaws and raucous cries of his comrades at the bar reminded him of the jeering birds, and he felt strangely alone.

“I like you, Nanashi,” Muzaki said.

“Thank you. I admire you, as well.” In the awkward silence that followed, Nanashi poured the remainder of the tea. He snapped his fingers at the proprietor, who carefully lurked just beyond eavesdropping vantage. The man scurried to fetch another pot.

“You’ve seen my fights?”

“Oh, certainly. My father never missed one. We watched them together.” Nanashi didn’t think about his previous life when he could avoid it. This memory knifed through the fog, the denials, and incised itself upon his mind.

“Ah. I am glad to hear such things in my declining years,” Muzaki said.

“In fact, my father was something of a scholar regarding the lives of the great wrestlers. He intended to write a book one day. He studied your biography closely. And the documentary that was done in the 1980s.”

“Such a bit of nonsense and fluff. I was vainglorious in my youth.”

“With reason.” Nanashi was impressed with the big man’s recovery from the anxious journey. He appeared altogether more relaxed and collected than his circumstances warranted. The Herons possessed a reputation for casual malice and sadism. Every gang in the land knew of the ghouls Mizo and Jiki, the Terrible Two. Surely Muzaki knew, as well. “How do you come by fearlessness?”

“Is such a thing possible?”

“Well, then. How do you come by the illusion of fearlessness? That is arguably a more formidable accomplishment.”

“Fear arises from the unknown. I now understand my situation perfectly. Besides, I am not truly here in the larger sense. None of us are. I am curious, though. Why is it that most gangsters talk with their mouths closed? All that grunting makes it difficult to understand what they are saying.”

“Makes them sound tough. Like bad guys in the movies.” Nanashi glanced at his associates—gibbons, snarling and strutting. Saddened, he flicked his gaze toward the darkness beyond the terrace. “It has occurred to me, more and more, that this existence is one of reckless waste. We labor in futility.”

“Ha! My friend… such a morose comment. And you’re completely sober.”

“I think we were all better off when I was a happy drunk.”

“The world adores happy drunks and it deifies fools. Did I not play the buffoon in the ring? No one really loved me until the costumes, the play acting and charades that replaced the real blood and tears of my sacred profession. When I abandoned sport and became a caricature, I ascended unto that most sublime tier of entertainers. I once dressed as a bat, like a *luchador*. Oh, the agony.”

Nanashi remembered the bat costume, indeed. And the fake metal chairs used as bludgeons, the fake blows, red dye and caramelized sugar. His father had stopped watching by then, had stuffed his notes and papers into a box and pretended he’d never been particularly interested in the first place.

“It is strange that you ended up with these thugs,” Muzaki said. “Something wondrous and terrible occurred in your youth.”

“I was discovered living a vagrant’s life in an alley. Heron family rescued me, redeemed me.”

“Like baby Moses discovered in his basket. What came before the basket?”

“I’m the Man with No Name. I drink, brood, kill. The past is immaterial.”

“Ah. Fuck the past!”

“Fuck the past!”

There was a scuffle at the bar. Mizo, red-faced and swearing, clutched Haru’s tie. Haru waved a flip knife. There was laughter as the others pulled them apart and shoved glasses into their hands in an attempt to drown their whiskey-fueled aggression by the counterintuitive method of killing fire with fire. Nanashi said, “The future is unwritten. I could stand and walk through the door and disappear in any direction. Why is that so difficult to remember in the present?”

“Because death and destruction follow the Man with No Name wherever he goes. This is the natural order of the universe.” Muzaki’s smile was strange.

His scars seemed to become more livid and to stretch in discomfiting ways. For a moment, the essential atavism of his countenance was accentuated; its intelligence and *humanity,* receding into the pits of his eyes.

Nanashi concentrated on the darkness. “Koma keeps me around because I am steady. I never lose my head when trouble comes.”

“A helpful talent in your business.”

“Yes.” Nanashi shifted his gaze and all was again well with Muzaki’s face. “There are six bullets. I could fire them in the order of the danger my brethren present. Two for Amida. Two for Haru. If I were lucky, I might strike Jiki in the heart or neck and need but a single shot. That would leave Koma and Mizo. Could you cross the floor and take one of them before he gathered his wits? I would suggest Koma as he has fewer to gather.”

Muzaki signaled. “Mr. Innkeeper, bring my friend and I a drink. Something strong. Something to fuck the past before it fucks him.”

Nanashi’s drink came—a cup of jet, pungent alcohol. “This is my seventh year sober.” He balanced the cup in his palm, then gulped the whiskey all at once. Sweet ever loving hell, it was good. He trembled. The innkeeper promptly poured again. “Uh, oh,” Nanashi said and made the booze disappear.

“To the hells with sobriety.” Muzaki upended his cup into a mouth missing several teeth. “We cannot afford the luxury of a clear mind.” He removed a piece of paper from his pocket. He leaned across the table. His breath was foul. “Take this. It’s different from the bad one I showed your brothers. Keep it under your pillow when you sleep tonight.”

Nanashi examined the paper. It had been crumpled and smoothed a hundred times. It was yellow and spackled with oil spots, or water stains. “What is this?”

“The beautiful thing that awaits us all. Focus on the imperfections in the paper and slowly count to five. Then close your eyes, but gently, don’t squeeze them shut, and turn your face toward the lamp over there.”

“I wonder what the point of this is.”

“Haven’t you ever faced the sun and traced the veins inside your eyelids?”

“Not recently.”

“You’ll understand. Start counting.”

“Perhaps now is not the time for riddles, Muzaki-san.”

“Yes, it is. Here’s one—I once had seven brothers. Like Saturn, father ate my brothers, but my mother was clever. She swaddled a suckling pig and fed it to him in my place.”

“That seems more like a mystery than a riddle… or a joke of poor taste.”

“Ha! And as Polyphemus was taken with Odysseus, your mirth delights me.”

“You should decide between the Romans and the Greeks. Will you devour me last?”

“Are you drunk already, brave Ronin? Come, indulge me. Look at the paper and count.” He gave Nanashi a friendly slap to help him concentrate.

Nanashi concentrated on the blotches on the paper—some were dark and sufficiently ominous to have escaped from some doctor’s inkblot book. He counted to five, then closed his eyes and tilted his face toward the lamp hanging near their table. Its light chased shadows across his eyelids. “Shit!” He caught the edge of the table to keep from toppling.

“Most people see Jesus.”

“Where did you get this? What is it?”

“An American gave me one of those when I was a boy. He was one of my father’s associates—a military person, I suspect. So many of father’s friends were, after all. We’d retired outside after dinner on a pleasant summer evening. The man asked me if I liked magic. He showed me a piece of paper much like this one, and told me what to do. My father wasn’t pleased. They had an argument and the man apologized. He winked at me behind Father’s back and let me keep the paper to play with, to show the other boys at school.”

“I didn’t see Jesus.” Nanashi’s vision still swam red. “Or the Buddha.”

“No? Not everyone does. What was it, then?”

“The other one.”

“You are the kindest of them. You are also the worst of them. It would be easy to love or hate you, Nanashi-san. That is why I am going to give you a

rabbit’s prayer. My gift to a fellow traveler.”

“A rabbit’s prayer.”

Muzaki nodded gravely. “Remember not to fuck up when the moment arrives. You’ll have one chance.”

“Huh?” Nanashi said. The booze was hitting him like a truck.

“Hey, Nanashi!” Amida called from the bar. His collar was open, his usually immaculate hair was disheveled. “Come join us in the springs. Hurry up!”

“Oh, do let’s,” Muzaki said as Amida staggered away through an open panel on the opposite end of the room.

Through this side doorway and down some steps, they exited the lodge and made their way along a path to the timber bathhouse. Inside was a low-ceilinged cave Nanashi was sure he’d dreamt of before. Steam rose from an oblong pool. The bottom and sides of the pool were composed of smoothed, natural stone. Green and blue light rippled against the walls and the men’s shadows capered there, like silhouettes cast by a magic lantern.

“In feudal times this was a sacred cave,” Muzaki said, and his voice resonated eerily and Nanashi had a flash of Kirk Douglas confronting the Cyclops in its lair. “It is rumored that powerful samurai travelled here to bathe in preparation for important battles and duels of honor.”

Nanashi found the enclosure oppressive. The steam, the closeness of the walls, combined to evoke a profound disquiet. He watched his clan brothers splashing and wrestling, all of them inked in elaborate tattoos from the neck down—their flesh crawled with snakes and herons and scorpions and mythical beasts, all in hues of red and green and black. Except for Jiki; he leaped in fully clothed, and his shirt billowed around his chest.

“My manager threw a party for me here in 1987. This was before your clan took over the place. There were girls back then.”

The house servants had been shooed away by Koma, so Nanashi undressed himself. He unbuttoned his shirt. He folded his clothes and placed them on a bench. He wrapped his revolver in a towel and set it atop the clothes. The water was the temperature of blood and it lapped at his throat. His own needlework was intricate and expensive, commissioned to one of the

greatest tattoo artists in all of Japan. The others, especially Koma, were jealous despite the fact he'd earned the illustrations by dint of committing more violence than all but the most aged soldiers of the Heron.

Nanashi never truly enjoyed his profession nor its magnificent rewards. He was simply ruthless; during conflict, remoteness stole over him, as if a hole had opened in his heart. Blood flowed, ink flowed. Violence and Irezumi, vines on a rail. Seven years of mayhem had afforded him a second skin more glorious than the infant first. He fantasized about the effort it might require to remove those layers, needle prick by needle prick. He wondered how much of himself remained underneath.

Everyone stopped when Muzaki, frightful in his nakedness, waded into the pool until he mostly submerged, a massive bullfrog, exposing only his eyes and sloping forehead. He farted and bubbles wobbled to the surface. Jiki screeched laughter, and moments later the clan surrounded Muzaki. Muzaki reared, spitting streams of water at them, gently pushing them beneath the surface when they ventured within the span of his meaty arms.

Nanashi's nausea intensified. He turned his back to them and pressed his forehead against the slick rim of the pool. He saw the American actor driving the sharpened pole into the giant's eye, again and again.

Koma assigned Nanashi, Amida, and Muzaki to a sleeping chamber. Amida volunteered for first watch, having shaken off much of his previous drunkenness. He produced a deck of cards and offered their captive a game of *Uta-garuta.*

Nanashi lay upon a mat in the corner, listening to the whispered recitations of each *waka* until their voices diminished to white noise. He dreamed of kneeling on rice paper in the ornate home of dearly deceased Uncle Kojima. He was shirtless and the room was cold, but sweat already slickened the hilt of the Tanto knife in his fist. Light flickered from candles, obscuring the faces of his brethren, who gathered around him in funereal silence. Uncle Kojima sat in a padded chair several paces in front of Nanashi. Uncle's chair had been situated directly beneath a hanging lamp. The old man was dressed in a conservative black suit. He rested an elbow on the arm of the

chair, hand covering his mouth. Probably to hide his smile. Uncle Kojima enjoyed pain and suffering. To his left was a small wooden table; on the table, a jar. Uncle Kojima caressed the jar; he slowly drummed his fingers on the metal lid.

Nanashi looked down at the knife. He tried not to consider the jar as he folded his left hand into a partial fist, leaving the pinky exposed. He pressed the edge of the blade against the second joint and drew a long breath—

—he was flying over forested mountains, skimming treetops. Wind whipped his face and the light was flat and grimy. He landed in a clearing on a steep hillside. Moss-covered boulders strew the hill and continued into the brush. He took a step and something crunched under his heel—a human skull. There were skulls everywhere; a vast, moldering carpet of them, and ribcages and leg bones mostly subsumed by the damp earth. Amid the bones lay rotted articles of clothing, backpacks, remnants of camp tents, tires from vehicles so old the rubber had melted. Dread overcame him, rooted him in his tracks, and he groaned. He knew if archeologists dug into this hillside they'd unearth a fossil record of carnage that burrowed into the yawning mouth of antiquity. Someone whistled from the trees; a soft, lilting tune that was answered from several hidden locations. The whistling grew louder, accompanied by cracking branches. Men wearing antlers, their bulky torsos covered in animal skins, shambled forth. They hooted and whistled a song he almost recognized; something incongruously popular, something urban, which made it all the more awful. One of the misshapen brutes waved—

—Nanashi plunged from a terrible height into water. At first he drifted in lightless depths, arms and legs spread loosely, and his previous panic melted, replaced by a sense of finality, of release. Gradually, his surroundings brightened, exposed by an unearthly, muted radiance that came from many directions at once. He followed the bubbles of his own escaping breath upward and saw an inverted bed of fleshy kelp, or soft, white tubers, swaying as the water in the jar sloshed. The white tubers had faces he began to recognize when a monstrously large hand, distorted by the curved glass walls, closed around the jar and all was dark—

—and Nanashi fell back into the sleeping chamber, frozen upon his mat. Someone in another room played a stringed instrument, plucking at the

chords and humming the tune he'd heard whistled by the mountain phantoms.

A single ray of lamplight filtered down to illuminate the prisoner Muzaki in profile, seated cross-legged near the door, head bowed to his breast. He wore a thick towel wrapped around his midsection and he twitched with each discordant note struck by the neighboring musician. Nanashi realized that despite the pain of his seized muscles, the hyper-clarity of his senses, this was another part of the dream. The music was a figment—it faded in and out, yet Muzaki twitched in metronome and a cotton cloud muffled and nullified the chorus of snores, groans, and flatulence of the sleeping gangsters as they lay scattered like dolls beyond paper thin walls and sliding panels.

Sound contracted around Nanashi, reduced to his thumping heart, his labored panting. A fly alighted on Nanashi's cheek, drawn by his sweat, and just then nearby Muzaki's arms flew wide and his head thrust back so the sinews of his neck were taut. A seam opened him, bisected his flesh from temple to toe. The man divided, skin and bone elongating until twin halves became separate wholes, yoked at the spine by a length of ganglia. Then each whole divided again and soon there was a daisy chain of howling Muzaki's elongating toward infinity.

Nanashi was paralyzed, yet fully aware, as blood poured across the floor and rushed toward his gaping mouth—

The morning was overcast. Nanashi sat on the chilly terrace and ate a bowl of white rice and drank several cups of black coffee laced with brandy. Normally, tea was his preference. However, today was a coffee and liquor sort of day. The proprietor owned an espresso machine. He made the coffee into syrup, Turkish style, per Nanashi's specifications.

The rest of the gang were inside. Through the glass, he saw Koma slouched at a corner table, cradling his head and talking on the house phone. He was conferring with his bookie about the horse races—he scribbled on slips of paper, hunting through his pockets every few seconds for more of them. Gambling was his particular area of expertise, although he'd never been

wise enough to avoid becoming addicted to the very vice he peddled. He owed money everywhere and people had begun to whisper. Apparently the latest news wasn't good—he barked at anyone who came close. His voice barely reached Nanashi, as if he and the others were calling out from a distant valley.

Amida and Haru stepped onto the terrace to smoke cigarettes. "Good morning," Haru said. He lighted two cigarettes and walked over and handed one to Nanashi. "My head is swollen from too many drinks. I hardly remember anything from last night. Good thing you gave up drinking, huh? You could be suffering like me."

Nanashi smiled. He wondered if Koma or the maniac twins had noticed him downing liquor. Koma would be quite alarmed if he learned that his subordinate had fallen off the wagon. Koma might decide to cut his losses if Nanashi became so reckless as he'd been when they first rehabilitated him in the bad old days. Koma was looking for the slightest excuse. Nanashi didn't really give a damn one way or the other. That bothered him a little.

Haru's face was doughy with exhaustion. He rubbed his eye. "I feel like shit, Nanashi. I didn't sleep a wink. What about you?"

"I slept like a baby."

"Yeah?"

"Uh-huh."

"Damn. I want to grow up and be just like you. You're a cool customer. Nothing bothers you. Hey, Amida. How'd you sleep last night?"

"Like shit," Amida said. He looked as bad as Haru.

"Me too! But our friend here, he slept the night through. Fresh as a daisy!"

"He doesn't drink. If I didn't drink, I'd be fresh as a daisy too."

"Maybe I should give up liquor. What are you drinking?" Haru gestured at Nanashi's cup.

"Coffee."

"Yeah? Maybe that's what I should do—drink coffee, like you."

"Maybe you should."

"What?"

Koma yelled from inside, “Get Nanashi in here!”

“Koma’s asking for you,” Haru said. “Could I try that?” He took Nanashi’s coffee and sipped. He made a face. “How can you drink this stuff?”

“Where’s Muzaki?”

“Jiki and Mizo took him for a walk. Muzaki walks two miles every morning. Wouldn’t know it from his looks.”

Nanashi took Muzaki’s yellow paper from his pocket, careful not to unfold it this time. He stared at it a moment before lighting a corner with the tip of his cigarette. He held the paper at arm’s length and watched it burn to a crisp, its ashes scattered by the breeze.

Haru said, “Did Muzaki show you the trick?”

“Which one?”

“The one where you stare at some spots and then close your eyes. I saw Buddha!”

Koma shouted an epithet.

“Koma wants you,” Amida said. He leaned against the rail so that his hair hung over the gulf. His voice was weak. “Please don’t piss him off this early in the morning. My head feels like a kettle drum.”

“Your *ass* looks like two bongos! You need to exercise.” Haru slapped his own buttock for emphasis. “My girlfriend makes me work out with her to *Bunz of Iron*. She owns the whole series. It’s a miracle.”

“You watch workout videos with your girlfriend?”

“Why not? My ass looks great, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it does.”

Nanashi stubbed his cigarette in the saucer and walked inside. He sat across from Koma who was clutching a fistful of the betting slips. More lay on the table, while others had fallen to the floor.

Koma’s bloodshot eyes bulged dangerously and the blister on his lip was ripe as a grape. His dirty breakfast dishes hadn’t been cleared away and the ashtray was already half full. He slammed the phone and wiped his sweaty face with a handkerchief. “When Jiki and Mizo get back, we’re all going for

a drive to the quarry.” He said this without glancing up, as if his gruffness disguised shame.

“When did Uncle Yutaka call?”

“I don’t know. An hour ago.”

Nanashi stared at the top of Koma’s skull where the hair was relentlessly thinning. “Are we sure about this?”

“Yeah, yeah. Uncle was clear. We take him to the quarry.”

“Okay.”

“Okay with you? Our orders meet with your approval?” Koma stuffed the slips into his coat pocket. “Go on. Get the fuck away from me. You’re giving me a headache. Hold on. Get those for me.” He pointed at the slips scattered around his feet and glowered while Nanashi crouched, leaning under the table, and scooped them into his hand. “Okay, okay. Give them here. *Now* beat it.”

Nanashi checked his watch. He snapped his fingers at one of the young waiters loitering about and ordered him to shine his shoes. Normally, he shined his own shoes, ironed his own clothes. The kid’s indolence, his casual jocularity, irritated him. He phoned Yuki and apologized immediately for waking her. She mumbled with exhaustion, wondered if he’d be home soon. Her boss was being an asshole. He laughed and told her it was going around, and promised to pick her up at the end of her next shift. Her answers were vague and far apart, so he said goodbye, made kissing noises, and broke the connection. The kid shining his shoes smirked before averting his gaze. Nanashi toyed with the idea of kicking him in the throat, making him an example for the other little punks. That’s what Amida or Haru would’ve done. Instead, he didn’t tip.

They got on the road again—same arrangement as the previous day. This time, no one talked. Nanashi sensed the change in his associates—they were strung tight now that word of Uncle Yutaka’s decision had passed among them. Koma drove with both hands, white-knuckling the wheel. Haru put on his headphones and stared out the window. Muzaki seemed oblivious to

the tension. He yawned and leaned back, hands folded behind his neck, eyes half closed.

Nanashi lighted a cigarette, grateful no one was interested in conversation. He sneaked glances at Muzaki in the rearview mirror, wondering how much of the heavy-lidded slothfulness was an act. Certainly, he was no one's fool. Could he really be at peace? What did such a thing feel like? Already, Nanashi's throat was dry. The need for a drink was an itch in the back of his mind. He hadn't fallen from the wagon—he'd leaped.

Their route was circuitous and took them through a series of off-ramps and access roads to a plain of broken slabs of granite. Decrepit paved lots looped as fractured geometric patterns into the distance. Koma parked among weeds and crushed glass and flattened bottle caps at the rim of a manmade crater. An abandoned derrick rusted down there amid pools of orange alkaline and pieces of ruined machinery, and rocks and gravel.

Amida rolled alongside. The doors clanked open and everyone got out, stretched, and lighted cigarettes with fancy lighters. Haru started snapping pictures, gesturing for his comrades to strike poses. They stood around making nervous small talk until Koma gave Amida a look. Amida dropped his cigarette and ground it under the heel of his loafer. He stuck his hands into his pockets and shuffled over to where Muzaki was peering into the pit. He stood so close to Muzaki, their shoulders brushed. A slender blade dropped from Amida's sleeve and glittered in his hand.

Nanashi sat on the bumper of the Cadillac and folded his arms. His mind began to empty. The light was reddening. Had they driven so long? A seagull drifted past. Yuki, sweet Yuki, would be dressing for work. She'd be putting on her cocktail dress, dusting her cheeks with the barest hint of glitter. Nanashi's father patted the couch—on television the great Muzaki raised an opponent overhead, and the black and white crowd cheered. *He* wasn't the one about to meet his fate, so why was it *his* life flashing before his eyes?

Muzaki laughed at something Amida said. He glanced over his shoulder at Nanashi and winked. He casually grabbed Amida by the belt, lifted him to his shoe tips, and flung him into space. Nanashi was so shocked at the slapstick aspect of the event, he chuckled. The other men froze in a tableau

of department store manikins, cigarettes poised near their slack mouths, and Haru's camera fixed to his eye. Muzaki ignored everyone, leaning farther out, hands on knees, to regard hapless Amida's earthward trajectory.

The camera clicked. Jiki squawked and hopped into action, brandishing a steel jack handle with tape wrapped around the grip. He smashed Muzaki in the base of his skull with a hollow, ringing *thunk*. Muzaki didn't flinch, so Jiki tried again, starting from his ankles and looping the jack handle in an overhand strike, as if he were splitting a log. This time, Muzaki took a small step and pitched forward and dropped from view. That broke the group paralysis, and in a stream, Jiki, Mizo, and Haru went whooping and scrambling after him.

Koma ran to the edge, fancy lemon hat in hand. He pulled at his hair with his other hand and made frequent unhappy exclamations about the scene below. A series of *pops* echoed from the pit. Then three more, much lighter ones followed by a bunch of shouting. Nanashi recognized the first gunshots as belonging to Haru's .32 automatic. Haru had originally bought it for his girlfriend as a birthday present. She didn't like guns and he lost his own pistol into a canal while drunk, so now he carried the puny .32 and hoped no one would notice to give him shit—which everyone had, naturally. The second volley came from a .22 pistol, although it was a mystery who might be strapped with such an embarrassingly trivial caliber weapon. The .32 fired again. The shouting resumed, accompanied by cries of pain, but no more gunshots.

"What the fuck! What the fuck! Doesn't anybody in this gang carry a *real* gun?" Koma sounded as if he were going out of his mind. He grabbed a chunk of loose rock and hurled it. "You fucking idiots! You can't shoot a rhino with a pellet gun!" He ran back to Nanashi. His face was shiny with rage and terror. "You've got a cannon—get your ass down there and do something! Blow his fucking head off!"

"No," Nanashi said. He stared at his shoes. The very notion of departing the comforting gravity of the car bumper made him sick and dizzy.

You'll have a rabbit's chance.

"What? Go! Go!" When Nanashi didn't answer, Koma screeched and began slapping him about the head and shoulders with his hat. "What's

wrong with you? Have you lost your nerve? Are you some kind of chicken?”

Nanashi shielded his face from the blows. He wept in pain and humiliation. Koma kept slapping him with the ridiculous hat. He only stopped when Mizo jogged past them to the rear of the other car and sprang the trunk. The bow-legged little man grabbed a red fireman’s axe. He huffed and puffed. His baggy clothes were splattered with blood. His face was swollen and agonized like a man in the throes of an orgasm.

Koma said, “What the fuck is going on down there? Whose axe is that?” Mizo shook his head, too winded to speak. He scurried off. Koma put his hat on and walked heavily to the edge of the quarry. He stood there for a while, observing the ruckus. His shoulders slumped. Eventually it became quiet, and he said, “Holy fuck,” a few times. He walked back to the car and stood before Nanashi. His eyes were glassy. “Holy fuck,” he said. “Good thing somebody brought an axe, I guess.” He joined Nanashi on the bumper. He dug around in his jacket and removed a pack of cigarettes, and cursed to find it empty. As he balled the pack in his fist, his cell phone began to play a tinny melody.

Nanashi stood and moved away from the Cadillac to compose himself. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve and blew his nose. Behind him, Koma finally answered the phone. After a long pause, he said in a perfectly calm voice, “*What do you mean it’s off?”*

Part Two
The Maze of Knives

They journeyed into darkness.

Nanashi drove because Koma was far too shaken by contemplating his possible fate once they returned to the city. Haru tended Amida in the back seat. Amida’s suit was tattered. He’d broken his arm in the fall. His nose was crushed into a jellified lump. He’d bled so severely blood coagulated in a bib on his chest, caked his face like a rubber mask. He moaned whenever Nanashi changed lanes too quickly, or hit a bump, or touched the radio volume. Koma moaned too.

Jiki and Mizo were stuck in the Honda with Muzaki's mutilated corpse. Mizo was driving. His headlights trailed a few car-lengths back and Nanashi distracted himself from fantasies of impending doom by speculating about the current conversation going on in the Honda. They, being idiots, meant this line of conjecture didn't go far. The last he'd seen them, the two were laughing hysterically, gore soaking their clothes. Jiki had made a comment that provoked Mizo into chasing him around with the axe until Koma screamed that he was going to have their fingers cut off if they didn't shut the fuck up.

Instead, Nanashi's mind went to Muzaki's bulk wrapped in a tarp and rammed into the back of the car. It had taken forty-five minutes and Mizo, Jiki, and Haru's combined efforts to drag him from the pit. Nanashi was powerless to tear his gaze away from the whole clumsy, awful mess, right up until Haru kept slamming the door on Muzaki's shoeless foot as it dangled. Uncle Yutaka wanted the corpse returned to headquarters, although he didn't say why. Nanashi suspected it was because he and Uncles Nobukazu and Ichiban were sentimental enough to think the famous wrestler deserved a proper ceremony. This displeased Haru, Jiki, and Mizo, who unanimously agreed that burying Muzaki in the quarry and pretending none of it had ever happened was the best plan. Amida probably agreed with the consensus view, but his grunts and gurgles were unintelligible.

The way Nanashi figured, all of them were already dead men. Dead rabbits, if one preferred.

"What a day," Koma said. He turned on the radio and scanned through the channels. He turned the radio off. He suddenly beamed like a child. "You are in a lot of trouble when we get home. Uncle is going to be angry with you. This is all your fault, Nanashi-san. He will blame you completely." This seemed to give him comfort and he patted Nanashi's arm affectionately. "Got a cigarette?"

Nanashi pushed in the dash lighter. When it popped, he stuck two cigarettes into his mouth and lighted them. He handed one to Koma. The headlights washed over a sign warning of steep grades and sharp turns ahead. The road curved into a forest. He glanced at the side mirror.

Koma sighed. “What a day, what a day,” he said, still smiling. “If only Uncle called a few minutes earlier, it would’ve been a happier ending. This means war with the Dragon. Surely they’ll be gunning for us all. We will need to take precautions. Change where we eat, get our dry cleaning done—I won’t be able to show my face at the Palace of the Sunfish until we settle our scores. No more packages. The magistrate who was blown to bits in Kyoto… that was the Dragon. The sneaky bastards love letter bombs. This is terrible.”

Yes, yes, Nanashi thought Koma had it right. This was terrible. Then he glanced in the mirror and saw Mizo’s headlights make a hard right onto an access road and vanish into the darkness. He tried to recall what lay down that road—an estuary, a canal, something on that order. A chill stole over him and he experienced a split second premonition of evil that caused him to swoon. The car lurched and Koma swore, not aware of the drama unfolding behind them.

What could it mean?

“Shit, we are definitely in trouble.” Nanashi coasted onto the shoulder until bits of grit and gravel crunched under the Cadillac’s wheels, then switched the hazard flashers on and smoked his cigarette. He fished out a flask of whiskey and had a sip while Koma stared at him incredulously. Nanashi observed a stream of headlights the mirror, daring to hope, but none belonged to Mizo’s Honda.

Haru stuck his face over the front seats and said, “What is it? Why are we stopped? Give me some of that booze.”

Nanashi gave him the booze and when Haru had drunk greedily, Nanashi handed the flask to Koma who also took a long, shuddering drink. Nanashi said, “The twins split.”

“Split?” Koma’s eyes were wild. He rolled down the window and twisted in his seat to look backward along the highway. “Where the hell are those clowns? How could they get lost? Idiots! Now is the time to stick together!”

“Not lost. Just gone.” Nanashi rubbed his eyes.

“Dumbass. You should’ve said something.”

“Oh, no,” Haru said. “Those crazy bastards. I always knew something like this was bound to happen. The cowards have run away. Scurried into the night like rats.”

Nanashi didn’t think that was the case—the twins were stupid and stupidly fearless. Neither would think to flee the coming apocalypse until they were trapped in a cellar and being flayed alive by Dragon enforcers. He kept his peace, however.

“But wait.” Koma slumped into his seat. “Those idiots don’t run from a fight. Is it possible we’ve been betrayed? Did the Dragon get to them? We pay them like shit, that’s for sure.”

Haru snatched the flask and shook his head between gulps. “No way. The Dragon only wants them for fish bait. Even those two retards wouldn’t be that dumb.”

This was true. Once upon a time the twins had crossed the rival gang in such a spectacular fashion that there could be no rapprochement under any conceivable circumstance. The twins had gained their celebrated status as dreaded Heron enforcers after the legendary feat of storming a fortified stronghold and executing eight soldiers of the Dragon Syndicate who’d assembled to plot an attack on the Heron Clan. It was a slaughter of such magnitude (the soldiers were renowned assassins and all around tough guys) and conducted with such ruthlessness and audacity that the criminal underworld buzzed for months afterward. Uncle Nobukazu, the twins’ patron, basked quite smugly in the afterglow. He was said to have visited the duo in their private hospital room (as they’d suffered serious injuries during their heroics), waiting upon them hand and foot with sweets, cigarettes, and liquor.

Yes, the Terrible Two managed to murder eight foes at a single go, however, the feat wasn’t quite as heroic as the storytellers later made it out to be. For one thing, the rival gangsters had gathered in a shabby motel, not a fortress sanctum. For another, the Dragons hadn’t assembled to assault the Herons, they’d been summoned by the syndicate elders to await orders for escorting a shipment of designer clothing they’d extorted a small corporation into selling them on the cheap. Nothing exotic or particularly important about the job, which was why all of the men involved were either

foot soldiers or hard cases long past their prime. The Terrible Two got wind of the caper from a little creep on the periphery of the Dragon Syndicate, a shiner of shoes and fetcher of sake who'd taken a kick in the ribs from one of his betters and decided to get revenge. The creep happened to share a needle in a den with two likely friends and thus history was written.

As it happened, the twins had recently come into possession of ancient surplus military hardware including an AK-47 and a real live functioning flamethrower circa WWII. Neither of the goons had the foggiest clue regarding the care and operation of a pack of crayons much less a lethal antipersonnel device. Be that as it may, after gleaning the basic mechanics from a how-to internet video, the Terrible Two packed the flamethrower and some guns into a sports car Mizo jacked from behind a seedy tavern and away they went, both of them fidgeting from the coke they'd snorted that afternoon.

They spent half the evening locating the flophouse motel where their quarry lurked, then circled the joint a dozen times in an effort to scope the opposition. Jiki took a turn at the wheel and rear-ended another car and received a warning from the police. Lucky for him there was a major traffic accident across town and the distracted cops didn't run the plates on the stolen car or happen to glance in the backseat where deadly weapons were stacked in plain view.

Phase Two saw them creeping through a field of shrubbery and broken glass until they were huddled outside the roomful of over-the-hill yakuza. The Dragons were drunk and drugged up. Some slept, others sat around in their underwear, smoking grass, playing cards, and scratching flabby guts while cops and robbers shot each other on the television. Jiki and Mizo were not quite so foolish as to charge in, guns blasting, not quite so ferociously suicidal. In any event, Mizo was particularly intrigued to see what havoc he could wreak with his new toy, which he'd strapped to his back and primed for action.

The gang was oblivious to their impending doom, with the exception of one fellow sitting cross-legged on a bed next to the window. This gangster was so stoned he had no clue what to make of the wand slipping between the blinds, and actually cocked his head to peer down the nozzle right before Mizo squeezed the trigger.

The entire motel went up in flames. People, yakuza and innocent guests alike, shrieked and died as smoke boiled and the black sky was painted hellish hues of orange and red. The Terrible Two fled for the car, laughing and hooting in hyena joy, and all might've gone perfectly if Jiki, who drove because Mizo was still lugging the flamethrower, hadn't decided to cruise past the scene of the inferno to gloat over their victory. A Dragon enforcer staggered from the conflagration clad only in shorts—hair smoldering, face slagged from the intense heat—and unloaded his dual automatic pistols. Jiki panicked and floored the accelerator and the yakuza stood in the middle of the road with action hero aplomb, popping off a few final rounds at their disappearing taillights before he collapsed in a smoldering heap and died. Meanwhile, a bullet punched through the car's rear window and ricocheted from the tank on Mizo's back. He screamed in surprise and Jiki swerved all over, tires screeching, rubber burning, and somehow during the confusion the flamethrower got set off again and turned the car into a fireball Jiki promptly steered off the street and into a canal.

Satan apparently watches over his own because both men survived with minor burns, a few broken bones, and singed scalps. Hailed as heroes of the clan, only a handful of insiders ever knew the reality: The Terrible Two were a pair of craven, fucking morons. Famous fucking morons, now.

The Dragon Syndicate were not amused.

By the grace of iron-strong custom and venerable gangster tradition regarding truces were Jiki and Mizo kept from being summarily abducted and tortured and fed to the fishes. Sadly enough.

Nanashi said, "So much for the honor of ninkyō dantai," and laughed.

"What now?" Haru said in a thick voice. Amida moaned.

"We can't return to the office without the corpse." Koma had taken the cell phone from his pocket, but obviously lacked the courage to ring Uncle Yutaka with the current news. Things were likely tense around the gang clubhouse. "Okay, piss on it. Move over, I'm driving."

Koma and Nanashi traded places, although Koma didn't get moving right away. The four of them hunched for a while in the shadows, sporadically illuminated by the hazards and the flare of passing headlights. Nanashi shut

his eyes and the black motes aligned like a Venus flytrap's teeth snapping together.

The ghost of Muzaki whispered, *There are those who claim that Time is a ring. I have found it to be a maze, and my own role that of the Minotaur. Rabbit, O rabbit. Welcome to the maze.*

One often falls in dreams. In this case, Nanashi had the sense of traveling at great speed, like a bullet shot through the heart of a void. His eyes opened and blackness resolved into light and sound. Music scratched from a vinyl record—Black Betty by the venerable Ram Jams. Karaoke was quite popular with the yakuza and he'd learned all of the classics—Johnny Cash, Roger Miller, Led Zeppelin, The Beatles, The Clash, and dozens between. How many slobbering drunk renditions of "Green, Green Grass of Home" or "Folsom Prison Blues" had he delivered at yakuza bar haunts over the years? Lots and lots, was the answer.

The woman gave a short, stifled cry when she saw him in the middle of the hallway between the bathroom and bedroom. He would've said something to reassure her except for the inconvenient fact that his insides were on the verge of erupting. The vertigo felt similar to falling from an apartment window toward the upward rushing concrete.

This was the internationally renowned Susan Stucky in person, or in a dream that felt too close to reality for comfort. Lacking her customary pancake makeup and award-winning cinematography it had taken him a moment to place her. Shorter and thinner than he remembered, her blonde hair much darker and flung loose over her shoulder in a way she'd never worn it on celluloid; naked except for a pearl chain around her hips. Her flesh gleamed alabaster, pallid from shock or the soft low light that illuminated the passage.

Behind her lay a spacious living room decorated with wood and leather and stone. Moonlight dripped from the scalloped ceiling. A deep, steady growl emanated from the shadows, and a giant white and gray Akita swaggered into view, stiff-legged, hackles bunched. Heart-shaped tags jingled from its spiked collar as it slouched forward.

Nanashi smiled weakly at the brute and said, “Good doggie. Good boy.” He said it in English. He liked dogs. He gripped the butt of his revolver anyway.

But neither the dog nor the woman were reacting to his presence. Muzaki stood in the doorway of the bathroom. The wrestler loomed larger than life, clothing shredded, blood coursing from a dozen vicious cuts and gashes. Part of his face was crushed into butcher meat. His left arm was gone, hacked away near the elbow to match the stump of his left leg. He smiled through a mouthful of pulverized teeth. Gore slopped from his lips. He winked his one good eye and toppled backward and the door flew shut.

Nanashi heard *Goodbye*, *goodbye*, *love*, as a rustle of dry leaves in his brain.

Now woman and dog finally registered Nanashi’s presence. She patted the dog’s head. Her expression lost its animating dismay and smoothed to ice. She inclined her chin toward the front of the house. “Company coming.”

He almost asked who, and held his tongue. He knew exactly who. Word had traveled along the wire to Yokohama. Killers from the Heron would be en route. Possibly for murder, possibly for kidnapping. Either way it would be a routine clearing of accounts after the debacle with Muzaki, and lovely Susan Stucky wasn’t long for the world. Her future consisted of ropes, knives, and a shallow grave. He found his cigarettes, lighted two. He crossed the floor and gave her one of the cigarettes, which she accepted wordlessly. She stared at him and her eyes were cold enough to burn. He studied the ceiling.

“You are remarkably composed,” he said.

“So are you.”

“Believe me. I’m shitting a brick.”

“You must be a heavy.”

“Oh yeah.” He cracked his knuckles and loosened his tie.

She blew smoke. “Are you with me or against me?” No lipstick, no inflection except impersonal curiosity. Her scent was coconut lotion and sex.

“That’s a tough decision.”

“What’s the difficulty? I’ve got money if that’s the hangup.”

“I don’t want your money. May not need it, either, depending on how this goes.”

“It’s going to go shittily if past is prologue. You’re not stupid, not with that suit. What’s the real problem?”

“I’m a lunatic or this is a dream.”

“Oh? Transcendental meditation? A bad trip on some funky ’shrooms?”

He considered, shrugged. “Well, this scene doesn’t seem possible. Maybe I’m a ghost. Maybe I’m an astral projection.”

She casually reached up and slapped him. She’d had practice. “Nope, no silver cord. You’re here for reals, as the kids say. Get your game face on, bitch.”

He rubbed his mouth and smiled.

“Wes always said this moment would come. You’re a Heron. I expected one of ours at least.” Her gaze lingered on his open collar, the needlework. That she could read its fragment impressed him. “So, are you man or mouse? Friend or foe?”

The dizziness receded and Nanashi’s legs steadied. His instinct took over now: balls retracted, adrenaline flowed, higher brain functions reduced to static. Fear made an ecstatic of him. “I’m a rabbit, apparently.” His voice cracked. His gun was in his hand like magic. He moved past her into the living room, toward the main entrance, and gods it was a gorgeous home, opulent and cozy. He noted the decorative stones of a fountain, small busts of copper and bronze and jade, scarlet hangings and reed screens inlaid with onyx and gold calligraphy, bearskin rugs cast about haphazardly, and crossed polearms with tassels and pieces of samurai armor on stands and racks. So many wonderful things to kill with.

Muzaki had owned several such homes in Japan and others in the United States and Canada, and mistresses accompanied each. Truly a blessed man. Truly a cursed man.

Artificial fire flickered in the hearth. Rainbows of exotic fish shifted within tiered aquariums. These rainbows undulated across the woman and the dog as they silently watched him rush to drop the metallic drapes on the

windows. The rainbow pattern splayed over the blinds, sealing off his glimpse of the front yard and the outer darkness that pressed just past the porch lights.

“Where are we?” he said.

“Near Yamagata,” she said.

Yamagata lay many kilometers north of where he’d left his companions minutes ago. Before the blinds dropped he’d gotten an impression of big rocks and trees and assumed the property lay beyond the city limits. Several feet away the oak finish of a wet bar shone like true love and abutting it a cherry-panel turntable emitted its classic rock music. He opened a drawer and fixed himself a tall glass of Okuhida, tossed it back and poured another for himself and a fresh glass for the lady. She accepted the drink without comment. Confidence restored, he stared at her and downed his liquor. Neither of them blinked.

The dog whined uneasily. Its teeth were daggers.

Sweat trickled into the seams of Nanashi’s forehead and seeped along his cheeks. He felt stirrings of power, the surging vitality of a gorilla, a shark, a tiger. Fire kindled in the center of him, his flesh tingled and tightened and his asshole contracted to a marble. The sweet-bitter tastes of adrenaline cut with vodka prickled his tongue. A ferocious recklessness built within him not unlike the approaching climax of a sex act. He yawned, not quite ready, not quite there, but close.

“Oh, I like you,” she said without sounding as if she really did.

“Muzaki-san said the same.” The player clunked and a new record began to spin. Hair of the Dog, by Nazareth. He threw back his head and laughed from the belly. A roar. He realized she’d been dancing in the nude to the classic rock of her homeland when he and the grotesque phantom of her husband intruded so dramatically. He’d seen her dance onscreen, an erotic Dance of the Seven Veils routine for her Mafioso husband that caused audiences and critics to salivate. The Academy tossed her an Oscar nomination as a reward.

A bell gonged, twice. The front door came off its hinges.

Nanashi knew the one in charge, a slim man with a shaved head and blond goatee by the name of Kada. Kada the Sadist, some muttered. Kada the Brave. Kada the Handsome. Kada, second son of the Chairman himself, so Kada the Favored. A playboy, even by yakuza standards. He'd tittered behind his hand when Nanashi lost a piece of his finger that fateful night long ago. Nanashi didn't recognize the other five. Dead men but for the formalities.

Kada dressed in white. His minions wore black suits and slick sunglasses despite the hour, each standing with stick-up-the-ass rigidity. A despised lieutenant and five brothers Nanashi had never met. Both facts made everything much easier. Not that it would've been particularly hard on him in the first place. The Heron Clan had always treated him more as a favored dog than beloved family. His contempt and fear and the pulsing vodka flames helped. The smoldering disdain in the actress's eyes helped even more.

Kada appraised the situation with the imperious demeanor of a visiting Daimyo, his own sunglasses held between thumb and forefinger, tapping against his thigh. He raised an eyebrow. "I am surprised to see you here, little brother."

"How many more are outside?" Nanashi said, bowing curtly; a dip that barely satisfied protocol but allowed him to keep his eyes on the Sadist.

"There were a couple of guys in the yard. We took care of them. The Dragons are punks. Has this bitch given you any trouble?"

"No. I meant how many more men do you have?"

The blond hesitated, studying the room more closely. He slipped on his shades. "Just us. I don't need an army to collect a woman."

Nanashi raised the gun and shot him in the face.

Who taught you to fight? Muzaki said. He and Nanashi were on a beach in the gray light of dawn. Surf packed the sand and glazed it with pebbles and dead starfish. A frigid breeze blew from the water. Muzaki wore an old, elegant suit. He was whole again. The shine in his eyes seemed too lustrous. The curve of his smile too wide. Who trained you to kill?

Nobody, Nanashi said. In the distance, amid the driftwood and the swirling ebb and flow of the tide lay a dark blot.

—Once it began, Nanashi committed to his art with the dispassion and precision of clockwork machinery. He was all gears turning and springs uncoiling as he half crouched, free hand at midsection level, poised in a claw, gun arm stabbing forward. He swung the revolver, swung his entire body with pendulum smoothness and drilled the pair flanking their fallen leader. Three bullets, three down, but he missed with the fourth, while the fifth only clipped a man's shoulder and the survivors dove for cover. Two had pistols and the last wielded a sawed-off shotgun—

They don't teach you to kill in the dojo. Not in modern times.

Nobody taught me.

You burst whole from Jupiter's aching skull. A prodigy. A shark.

One day I picked up a knife. Later, I picked up a gun. I was also pretty quick to learn to pedal a bike and quite handy with a tit. They kept walking without stretching their legs and the distant blot squirmed and grew.

Muzaki said, I was lost as a young man during a shipwreck, out there. I suppose you know the story. Ring announcers have told it for decades.

—the shotgun gave Nanashi anxiety. He decided to kill that enemy next. The Akita had the same idea. It pounced on the guy, jaws locking onto his abdomen, shaggy body wrenching side to side in a frenzy that went straight back to the days of caves and saber tooth cats. The shotgun boomed and guts unspooled everywhere—dog guts, man guts, a jet of commingled guts, a sluice of seared blood and viscera. The man fired again, screaming in terror and agony, then he stopped screaming and the dog stopped growling. Shotgun guy was the one Nanashi had clipped and now he wondered if the slug had severed something important because the end came too quickly. Oh, but who was he to argue with the gods of death? A pall of smoke rolled over the room and Nazareth kept saying now somebody was messing with a sonofabitch. The house stank of burning hair, of burning blood, of scorched silk.

Crack, crack, crack went the popgun automatics accompanied by tiny spurts of flame from behind a potted plant and an overturned sofa where the yakuza had taken refuge. A bullet kicked loose carpeting near Nanashi's

polished shoe. Another bullet burnt past his ear and pinged through the metal drapery. Nanashi flung the revolver and palmed the stiletto he kept under his armpit. The guy behind the sofa was on empty and Nanashi vaulted it, knelt and one! two! piston-fast, stabbed the gangster in the throat as he struggled to reload. The guy kept fumbling with the cartridge and swatting at the blood pouring down the front of his suit, until his movements were slow motion. Nanashi forgot him and kept going, scuttling on all fours toward the miniature banyan tree in its wicker pot and directly for the gangster ridiculously exposed as he cowered there. The gangster was a kid, hard and cruel, his face already nicked and scarred. The kid lined up the barrel of his nickel-plated automatic and uncapped however many rounds he had left as Nanashi floated toward him, moving with the rock and sway of a hominid torn from a primordial hunting ground and projected across time and space into that ruined living room—

I don't recognize this place, Nanashi said. The beach continued to unreel. The landscape warped and refracted black and white, a negative. The ocean was blinding white.

This is the Maze, Muzaki said. His face shimmered a dull ivory and suggested that while the wounds had sealed he remained a bloodless, shambling thing that should not be. What is that? He pointed toward the shivering black spot that drew ever closer.

Nanashi strained to see and when he did he understood that a heavy stone had been rolled aside to reveal a secret nest that should've remained hidden. He fell to his knees and began to shriek, pop-eyed and insane.

Muzaki said, Don't be afraid, my nameless friend. You've done well and I'm here. I'm here for you. I've always been.

—goon number six was too frightened to aim straight and his shots went wherever errant shots go and then Nanashi slammed a knee into his chin and there went teeth, tongue, a yolk of blood and spit. The kid sprawled and Nanashi kicked him in the neck and again in the base of the spine. Bone crunched and the kid became still.

Nanashi straightened and breathed hard. He wiped his face with his sleeve.

"Are you finished?" Susan Stucky hadn't moved from her position in the hallway. She dropped her cigarette butt and carefully negotiated the

battlefield to the record player and yanked the cord out of the wall. A man who'd survived his horrible injuries groaned where he lay in the fetal position in a thickening pool of blood. Otherwise the house was quiet. The actress was alone at last, or so Nanashi surmised. Lost to her Hollywood cliques, the tabloids no longer bothered to mention her, an alien in alien land and doubly estranged by her own wealth, her princess-style investiture at Castle Muzaki. She went over and peered at the wounded man who stirred and raised his bloodied hand to her in supplication. She stepped back and gave Nanashi a look.

He retrieved his pistol and reloaded it without thinking; his mind sprinted ahead, calculating avenues of escape, vectors of pursuit, safe-houses, odds of prolonged survival. Violence, its preparation and aftermath, was his meditation. He didn't waste another bullet, simply hefted the fractured jade bust of some ancient dead god of the sea and smashed the gangster's skull with such force the man's glazed eyes started from their sockets and splashed against Nanashi's shoe. When Nanashi turned, he saw Susan Stucky kneeling by her dead dog and stroking its fur.

"All right," she said with dull satisfaction at the mess he'd made of her enemies. "These poor saps never stood a chance, huh? Good for us that they trusted you. You jumped across that line awfully quick."

There was a psychedelic moment where he relived every slashed throat, every gouged eye, every severed finger, every beating he'd administered purely upon orders from his Sworn Family for reasons he seldom understood. He'd once ripped a businessman's tongue free with pliers and fed it to him. He'd skinned a rival underboss alive with the edge of a trowel. He'd shoved a prostitute from a high rise roof knowing she was pregnant. And worse. Worse, always worse. He said, "Long time coming."

She straightened and regarded him. "You gangster boys are in a shooting war. The shit is going to hit the fan in a major way when news breaks of what happened to my beloved husband."

"We can't hang around." He snapped his fingers. "Gather what you need and come on. Two minutes. I won't wait longer."

"Just bring the car around, rabbit." She mockingly snapped her fingers behind her head as she turned away.

He walked through the main door, keeping his stride brisk yet unhurried. The night air tasted of pine and mineral dampness. As he'd presumed, Kada lied—there were two compact cars parked at the foot of the broad flagstone steps. Two men in the lead car, a driver in the second. The two in front allowed him to approach within spitting distance before the passenger side door flew wide and raucous techno music blasted forth. Stupid kids.

Nanashi gave the emerging gangster a friendly wave and put two rounds into his chest, then ducked low and shot the driver through the open door. The other driver had the presence of mind to throw his car into reverse. Unfortunately for him, he banged into an ornate retaining wall and by the time he'd changed gears and hit the accelerator Nanashi tapped the window with the barrel of his revolver. The man shouted an obscenity or a prayer and then he died with a smoking hole in his cheek. Nanashi toppled the corpse into the driveway, swept aside the frosting of shattered glass and climbed behind the wheel and waited.

Smoke billowed from the house. Red fire twinkled and capered. She'd smashed a few bottles of alcohol and struck a match on her way through the door. "Watch that bitch burn," she said and buckled in. She'd put on a silver kimono and slippers. Her purse was some sort of designer plastic; bulky and glossy black. She chain-smoked gourmet cigarettes from an enamel case. He couldn't place them from their odor.

She gave clipped directions that sent them along secondary roads. It surprised him that the route carried them away from the city instead of closer. He drove at risky speeds, trying to keep his thoughts in sight. The slick, narrow blacktop entered mountainous forest—white trees, white flashes of rock, white mist. The oni and the yokai were awake and traveling in parallel. Ghosts of hunger and vengeance cried the cry of night birds.

"There's a book about a woman whose husband randomly travels through time," she said. "It's a tearjerker. Sold a bajillion copies. That's what tearjerkers do."

"I haven't read it," he said.

"Are gangsters allowed to read chick lit?"

“Who’s going to stop us?”

“Well, this situation with me and Wes is like that sci-fi scenario. Except not really. Also, the romance is dead. Everything is about death with Wes.”

“Okay.” As soon as the yakuza tracked her down, and soon it would likely be, she was definitely dead, although that wouldn’t happen until she’d suffered enough to welcome annihilation.

“He did the paper trick, right? He always does the paper trick. I’m not sure whether that part is bullshit or not. I mean, the loony stuff about government mind control experiments is a red herring, but the pattern itself does pickle your brain all right. Doesn’t require paper, though. He could draw it in the sand or wave his hands in the air. I kinda suspect he could even just use his voice to conjure the effect. What else did he say?”

Nanashi shrugged.

“There was a bit about time and mazes and blah, blah, blah.”

“Blah, blah, blah,” he said.

“Wes doesn’t time travel. Time travel goes against Einstein, thus it’s impossible. Something else very fucked up is going on. Not time travel, though. Did you kill him? Was it you personally?”

He shook his head. The engine purred. Wind snickered through the hole he’d made in the window.

“I want you to thank whoever did it.”

“Send a postcard to the Yokohama office. The guys will appreciate the thought.” He brushed his hair back; useless in the teeth of the wind. Eventually he sealed the hole with the palm of his hand.

“With Wesley’s death, I am free.”

He grunted.

“I was his slave. That was the price to pay for bringing me back from the underworld. He’s King Pluto, our man Wes.”

“Yeah? Are you certain he’s not Polyphemus?”

“Don’t you dig, killer? All the myths are the same. Geography just changes how we explain the horrors.” She lighted yet another cigarette and smiled a

tight, bitter smile. “You’ll figure it out, bad boy. Act Two. Me, I’m beating feet.”

“Where am I taking you, huh?”

“It would be meaningless to say. Fear not—we’re almost there.”

You slaughtered your brothers. O woe unto thee! Nanashi could’ve tricked himself into hearing that whisper from Muzaki’s lips instead of the pit of his own subconscious. *Slaughtered sworn brothers for what? This sharp-tongued gaijin with nice legs? Guilt? Your fear of something larger than yourself?* Yes, that last thing felt right. There was his motive. He’d become enmeshed in the action of powerful forces, a leaf in the flood.

“Okay,” he said. “I am at your service.”

She laughed and it wasn’t the melodic timbre of her silver screen personae. This was swift, dark water over rocks, the quick bark of a crow. “Not mine, killer. You belong to a real sonofabitch.” She laughed again. “There, turn there. That’s my exit, stage left.”

He parked in a leaf-strewn lot near a picnic table and a drinking fountain. A small placard indicated it might be a park or preserve—the lettering was illegible and focusing upon it made his head ache.

Susan Stucky finished her cigarette. She opened her door and climbed out, pausing to lean back in and study him. In the dimness her expression was inscrutable. “Your boys are going to kill you?”

“If they find out that I helped you. Yes.”

“You going to tell them?”

He shrugged.

“The macho honor bit,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“The Dragon?”

“Yeah.” He smiled. “Nobody likes me.”

She smiled back. “Okay, rabbit. Thanks.”

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Where will you go? This is a forest.”

“You’re very observant. Maybe in the next life you should be a detective.” She slammed the door and walked in front of the car and followed the headlight beams. Her kimono shone like the moths milling around her pale hair. She vanished into the woodwork.

Nanashi smoked a cigarette while the engine idled. He sighed and got out and went after her. The slender trees were slick with dew. Fog dampened the rasp of his breath, his shoes scrabbling among roots and leaves. Illumination from the headlights quickly faded and he felt his way through opaline murk. Ahead, a bluish light infiltrated the forest. Shadows leaped around him as limbs creaked with a puff of wind.

Bushes rustled nearby and the Akita ghosted along, its white fur gone blue as an ice floe. Its eye flickered. Guts trailed from a fist-sized hole where the shotgun slug had torn through. Man and dog regarded one another in passing.

“The hell is this?” Nanashi said in wonderment. He almost expected Muzaki to mutter the answer. *Hell? Oh, yes, rabbit.*

The trees thinned and he caught glimpses of the born again dog. Once he could’ve sworn a woman’s voice echoed from the distance. He scrambled down a steep embankment, grasping exposed roots to keep from pitching onto his face. At the bottom was a gully and a fast-moving stream. The water flowed shin deep and cold enough to shock his feet numb. He trudged downstream as the light intensified and set the cloying mist ablaze and forced him to shield his eyes.

The gully widened into a field of short, damp grass. The moon seethed through a low cloudbank, spotlighting a cherry blossom tree in a shaft of blue fire. The tree reared in stately menace where the water cut a delta around its gnarled bole. Empty suits and shoes dangled from the branches. Pieces of jewelry glimmered in knotholes. Thunder rumbled. His mind became so full it blankly mirrored the blue moon and struck him dumb, pinned him to the spot. The moon’s eyelid peeled back and crimson radiance stabbed forth. Where the red light touched, grand black trees silently erupted from the grass like a child’s popup book and from each tree depended the sinister fruit of empty clothing. Chimes tinkled and sang.

A dog howled, or a god. Nanashi ran, slipping and splashing along the ravine, making for the car. He rose and fell and rose again to flee onward. Blue haze before him shivered as it was eaten by the red ray of the moon. One sidelong glance revealed a figure keeping pace, a stumbling, screaming lunatic who much resembled himself, and there were others at intervals between the skinny poplars and pines. Each of them rising, falling, rising. At his back the dog's howl deepened to a roar and the roar became a vast ripping sound as of a pavilion torn asunder in a hurricane.

He began to fly.

Dawn refused to break.

Nanashi drove the stolen car *like* it was stolen, drove with the abandon of a dead man. He ignored the scenery and stared directly ahead, afraid to blink lest he find himself catapulted through time and space via the pattern imprinted within his eyelids. He didn't entertain conscious thought. He focused on the pavement lines, focused on the rhythm of shifting, of pressing the pedal to the floorboard.

It should've been light when he finally returned to the mountain lodge, but was not. The staff stared at him. Their terror was the terror of peasants at the mercy of vengeful samurai in times of war. His immaculate hair was disheveled and wild as a bushman's, his fine clothes spattered in mud and torn at the seams. Dirt and blood ingrained his fingernails. He pointed his revolver at the innkeeper and asked if he'd seen Koma or the others. The Innkeeper shook his head frantically and when Nanashi cocked the hammer the man fell to his knees and blubbered while his wife chanted a prayer and the gaggle of serving boys wrung their hands and moaned.

Nanashi put the gun away. What had he expected to find? He searched the lodge proper, knowing the act was useless, and next he investigated the cottages and the sweltering cave with its hot springs. All was locked tight and dripping silence. None of the gang had sneaked back for an emergency rendezvous. He should square his shoulders and head for the city, present himself before his Sworn Father and accept judgment. Either that, or flee the country forever. Yuki would quit her job and run away with him to a

new life in America, somewhere the long arm of the clan couldn't reach. Problem was, the yakuza could reach anywhere. Such was the awful beauty of that particular monster. As for sweet Yuki… Yuki had family and friends, roots. She'd never consent to a fugitive life with her much older lover, a man of no status and bleak prospects.

Head down, he started the car and drove away, hands and feet making the necessary adjustments while his mind dissolved into itself. He was afraid and exhausted. There wasn't much else. Upon reaching the highway junction he steered south. His hands made the decision. Tears streamed down his cheeks. He gritted his teeth and clenched the leather of the steering wheel in a death grip.

Along the route to the pit where the Heron gang had done its murderous deed he stopped once to fill the tank. The station was deserted but for his car. Twilight smoldered at the periphery, held at bay by the plastic glow of the station lamps. He looked for signs in the contours of clouds, the constellations of dirt and debris that swirled across the pavement. Compelled by terrible inspiration, he finally dared to shut his eyes. When he opened them the tank had filled and a tiny woman smiled at him from the tiny screen on the pump.

Onward, he toiled.

Muzaki awaited him at the rim of the pit. He crawled forth over the lip in a parody of birth—first his clutching hands, then his head and torso, all of him moving at strange angles until he straightened to his full height. The wrestler appeared unscathed, albeit slightly pallid. He wore a white robe that gathered the frail light like the filament of a bulb. He got into the front passenger seat.

Nanashi swallowed hard. "Where do we go from here?"

"That depends on whether you saved her."

Nanashi remained silent. Muzaki nodded and a small, odd smile tugged at the corners of his blue lips. He pointed north with a hand that shone queerly alabaster.

Nanashi drove north. Kilometers rolled past. Dials and gauges reset themselves to their starting positions, but the car zoomed smoothly along the endless highway. He said, "I had a vision of Hell."

“Hell is just another neighborhood.”

“I have tried to convince myself that this is a nightmare.”

“Awake or dreaming, there’s no appreciable distinction.”

“Who are you? Are you even the man I watched on television all those years ago? Was there ever such a man?”

“I am a cursed, malignant brute. I cast a black aura. Other deserving souls, damned souls, in other words, sometimes catch in its hooks like fish in a dragnet.”

There was nothing to say. They flew more kilometers through the changing gloom until Muzaki said, “We exist in a universe of miracles and curses. The shipwreck during my childhood was both. Those of us who survived the waves and the rocks and the sharks, were stranded upon an island. The island was barren. There was nothing to eat except for one another. So it went and madness followed. On the forty-ninth day, rescuers came. Pale Ones, terrible to behold. They brought me and a couple of others away from the island. The bones of the rest were left for the seagulls to pick.”

Nanashi saw the child Muzaki lifted from the dirt by inhumanly gracile hands and borne across dark waters upon a gasp of wind. He beheld a crimson and purple mist, and through the mist the flint-sharp spikes of black cliffs streaked in white. He beheld towers, slender and jagged and cruel and the folk within them must also have been of a kind. An island of skulls and weeping shadows, haunted strains of melancholy tunes fluting through abandoned bones. A necropolis sanctuary. Nothing living could enter. Nothing human could enter. Yet there Muzaki had lived. There Muzaki had supped. There Muzaki had grown ever stronger with the passing cycles of time and tide.

Nanashi trembled and bit his tongue just to feel the pain and be reassured that he yet dwelt among the living.

Muzaki gestured and they took a spur that angled toward the sea. Nanashi spotted Koma’s Cadillac nosed into the ditch. Its doors were sprung. Bullet holes stitched the cobalt paint. The windows were blasted out. Glass and blood made a tapestry of the plush interior. The corpses were disfigured beyond recognition. Fistfuls of shell casings from automatic rifles glinted upon the ground. Nanashi wondered who’d betrayed his brothers to the

Dragon; a passing thought not unlike a stray cloud floating across the subterranean sky.

Muzaki read his mind. “Were the gracious Innkeeper and his wife afraid to see you? Afraid as if you’d returned from the grave?”

“Yeah.”

“Ah. I regret to inform you that those inestimable persons have dealt family secrets to your foes for many, many years. We should continue, eh?”

“I have seen enough.”

“It’s not *enough* until you’ve seen everything. Hurry!”

A bit farther the road branched and branched again and they came to a seawall. Jiki and Mizo’s Honda was parked in an otherwise empty lot near a metal pavilion that had toppled. No sign of the Terrible Two.

Nanashi pulled alongside the Honda and exited. His clothes were whipped by a breeze that came hard and cold, strong with salt and kelp stench and bits of sand. His hair fell across his face. Muzaki grasped his elbow and guided him down the wooden ramp to the beach.

“What are you?” Nanashi said.

“An eater of carrion.”

“Will you tell me something? I saved your wife. I kept my bargain.”

“I do not recall any bargain.”

“Tell me something. Please.”

“I’ve told you of mazes and curses and damned souls. Yet you speak of nightmares and lunacy. I tell you that the dead and the undead may travel freely within the static maze of reality, indeed, I have shown you the truth of the maze. You choose blindness, deafness. Human primates do so treasure their ignorance. Would that I could reclaim my own innocence of the howling wilderness that goes on forever.”

“None of this makes sense,” Nanashi said.

“Don’t you feel how cold my hand is, Nanashi?”

Nanashi did not answer.

“If your future happiness depends upon my revelations, then you are doomed to an existence of abject misery.” Muzaki’s odd smile spread across his broad features, warping them into something alien. “There are planets and stars and mountains and forests. There are great, hungry fishes in the sea. There is you and I, Hell and Not Hell. There is the simple fact that knowing doesn’t equal enlightenment. You are a bit of cotton dipped in the blood of the cosmos. That which is seen seeps inside and stains you. You have been stained, Nanashi-san. But, there is always more. Corruption is never finished with us.”

Pieces of skeletal driftwood and seashells crunched underfoot. The tide rolled in, green and black and thunderous. Farther along the shore was the dark spot Nanashi half-recalled from the phantasms he’d suffered while battling to protect the gaijin woman back at the house. As the true nature of the aberration crystallized in his mind, he gave a hoarse cry and threw himself prostrate and refused to move. Muzaki tenderly leaned down and clutched a fistful of hair and effortlessly dragged him over the hard-packed sand and toward the crashing waves.

Nanashi struggled like a baby. Vertigo returned with a vengeance. Sea and sky folded around them in origami fashion and drew them forward at tremendous velocity. A rocky isle materialized from the void and then Nanashi was cast sprawling. He spat dirt. Pebbles gouged his elbows and knees. Nothing of the world existed beyond the beach shelf and surrounding rocks except for the sea and the clouds that reflected the sea.

Jiki and Mizo’s Honda sat on a tilt, buried to the axles, where the beach curved. It had changed from how it had appeared in the parking lot. Blotchy handprints marred the window glass, doors, and hood.

Koma and his gangsters had dragged a mangled corpse nearby to a depression among the roots of a driftwood stump gone gray with age. The corpse bore a terrible resemblance to Muzaki. The men squatted in their ragged suits, but for Jiki and Mizo who’d stripped naked and now languished in the unnatural light. Their flesh gleamed as gray as the driftwood, and they preened, supremely unaffected by the chill wind or the salty spray that occasionally lashed them. The wretched creatures savaged the corpse, clawing into crevices and cavities for the choicest morsels.

Koma, his fine jacket saturated to a deep maroon, snapped a rib free and wrapped his pointed tongue around it and slurped.

The gang hesitated when they spied Nanashi, chunks of meat held close to their gaping jaws. Each regarded him with the bright-placidity of lazing crocodiles. Muzaki snarled, a bestial utterance fit to freeze a man's heart, and the unholy things cowered and grinned.

"*Brother,*" croaked Amida, ashen visage smeared in fresh gore, collar undone. His left arm dangled. He didn't seem to mind. His eyes were pure black, his sneer sharp and ravenous.

"*Brother!*" said the rest, happy.

Muzaki said, "Lo, the feast of the ghouls. This rock is the banquet table of their ilk and I, the master of ceremonies. I live, die, am consumed, and reborn in the sticky, rancid cycle that governs all matter." His flesh too had darkened to the sickly gray of spoilage and antiquity. His eyes were reptilian and ebon. He breathed out fumes of kelp and sickness and decay. "Oh, rabbit. I've lived a thousand lives, but always it comes to this. For this is the reality behind my façade."

When at last he could speak, Nanashi said, "Why did you have me protect the woman?"

"In my way I loved her."

"Such a monster as yourself can know love?"

"Yes. It is the most exquisite corruption, the greatest perversion dreamt of by the forces of darkness. There can be no curse without love."

The ghouls tittered in chorus and dug into the wrestler's old, abandoned meat.

Muzaki gestured languidly, imperiously, and several meters offshore the water gathered itself and bulged outward in a slick green dome. An iris slowly widened, revealing a tunnel that corkscrewed who knew where. He said, "Man with No Name, you are the sole living being on this island. Your old life is burned to ash. There are two paths remaining. Here among the ghouls and rebirth into the unlife. Or, out there and the unknown. You must choose."

Nanashi gazed first at the tunnel, then at the gory repast of his undead brothers. He groaned and wept. He drew the revolver and slid the barrel into his mouth. For an age he struggled to squeeze the trigger. Defeated, he dropped the gun and stood.

“Go,” Muzaki said. “This is not for you.”

For several moments Nanashi swayed, his sight turned inward. Abruptly he bent and snatched the revolver. Six bullets. Six targets. Perhaps it was fate. Perhaps it was fate mocking him. “This place isn’t for anyone.” He began to fire.

Nanashi threw the gun into the sea. He followed its arc. Hitching, halting, almost drunken, his feet carried him from the scene of slaughter and into the infinite mystery.

the worms crawl in,

This version taken from *Fearful Symmetries*, 2014
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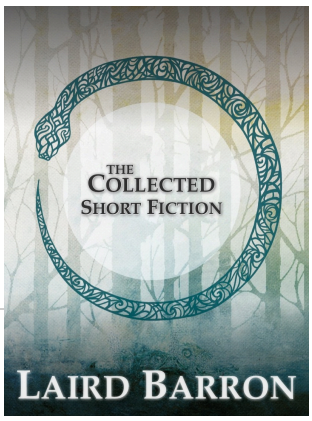


the worms crawl out. The worms play Pinochle on your snout.

We chanted that at mock funerals when I was a kid. Shoot your sister playing cowboys and Indians and she fell dead, that's your dirge. The playground bully challenges you to a duel after class, that's the ditty your friends hummed as the hour of doom approached.

Hadn't heard the worm song since I was twelve, but it's coming back into style, thanks to my wrath. I've been done a great wrong, you see. Done a great injustice by a man named Monroe. However, I've come to think of him as Fortunato. It makes me smile to do so.

He "tricks" me into going on the hiking trip. I've always had a hate-hate relationship with the great outdoors. Bad enough I'm stuck working nine to five in the weather; camping is a deal breaker. My feelings don't matter. He's as slick as a magician or a shrink: talks about one thing, shows you one thing, but there's always something up his sleeve. He knows his con, short or long. Can't dazzle 'em with brilliance, baffle 'em with bullshit, is his motto. Much as the hand is quicker than the eye, Monroe's bullshit usually defies my perception of it until after the fact when it's time to cry.

Phase one of the scam, he invites Ferris and me over to the house for a barbeque. Optimistically, I assume that's merely a cover to regale us with his latest sexual exploits, and yep, Monroe does chortle over a couple of girlfriends he has squirming on the hook, each completely ignorant of the other. But it turns out that this gloating is actually a pretext to maneuver me into a conversation about Moosehead Park and its fabulous game trails.

So, Elmer, you hunt, right? You lived in the woods when you were a kid. The only way he could know that, since I've never mentioned it, is from Ferris. And of course, I correct him. My dad had been the big white hunter

in the family; the rest of us were simply dragged along for the ride. Nonetheless, Monroe believes in education via osmosis. It isn't hunting that intrigues him. He is far too much of a wilting flower to lay hands on a rifle, much less put a bullet into the brainpan of some hapless animal. He needs street cred, as it were, wants to butch up his resume with the ladies, and a brief foray into the swamps of south central Alaska is just the ticket. First rule of disappearing into the wilderness is, always bring a buddy.

We chew some ribs, toss back a few brews, and thus plied with meat and drink I agree to tag along this very next Saturday for an overnight campout. It has to be me. Not a chance any of his colleagues will blow a perfectly good weekend with the shifty motherfucker. Plenty of them will gather for a free feed and trade shop gossip, but that is the extent of it. Dude probably thinks he's really clever, manipulating his lummox of a pal, albeit pal might be too strong a word.

Joke's on him. I'm not as dim as I pretend. The trip is exactly what I want. It's my big chance to settle the score.

Ferris doesn't say anything. She *looks* plenty worried. I pretend not to notice. Can't have her suspecting that I suspect she suspects I *know* there is something going on between her and Monroe. In that unguarded moment, her expression says she thinks her boyfriend is out of his gourd, putting himself at the mercy of a paranoid husband who can load a six-hundred-pound engine block barehanded. Alas, Monroe's downfall is his unremitting narcissism. He doesn't want to get away with snaking my wife, he wants to rub my nose in it.

If Ferris were to get a whiff of my true mood she'd forbid Monroe's excursion under no uncertain terms and spoil everything. Although, even in her most febrile visions, it's doubtful she could imagine I plan to off him in some devious manner and drop the body into a deep, dark pit. One of my flaws is jealousy. Not the biggest of them, either, not that she has the first inkling. We've been together since our late twenties. Going on fifteen years, and parts of me remain Terra Incognita to my lovely wife.

See, there are some things you should know about me, things I should get out in the open. I won't, though. Not until later.

Ferris worked as an administrative assistant at the high school where Monroe taught English. Fancied himself a poet, did our man Monroe. A skinny, weepy fella who preened as if his scraggly beard made him kin to Redford's liver-eating-Johnson and that his sonnets were worthy of Neruda.

Yeah, sonnets.

Ferris started bringing the shit home in a special folder, wanted my "professional" opinion. I'm no expert, I drill wells for a living. But yeah, I published a few pieces in lit journals over the years, had one chapbook about blood and vengeance picked up by Pudding House when I was younger and angrier. I read Monroe's poems, told her what I thought of them, which wasn't much. Classic poseur artiste. The kind of asshole who upon learning he can't strum a guitar to any effect minors in poetry or fiction to impress the doe-eyed girls who hang around coffee houses and the bored ones at faculty parties. One of those *I'm writing a book* shitheads who isn't really doing any such thing.

Yeah, everybody hates those guys.

Guys who kiss married women on the mouth aren't too popular either. Even though I was likely the last to know, I'd finally gotten wise at Monroe's Fourth of July house party. A fateful glimpse of him and Ferris in a window reflection was a splash of cold water for sure. Shielded by an open refrigerator door, both of them leaning in for a beer, and by god, Monroe laid it on her. The door swung closed and they acted casual. Cheeks a bit rosier, laughter a notch too sharp, and that was all. I played the oblivious fool. Wasn't tough; waves of numbness filled me, that big old local anesthetic of the gods. It was as if the enemy had dropped depth charges. Those bombs sink real deep before detonating. First time I'd ever thought of Ferris as an enemy.

I didn't fly into a rage or fall into despair. Nah, my reaction was to get chummy with Monroe. I fucked my wife more often and a lot more vigorously than was my habit. Also, I took some dough from a rainy day account and paid a private eye to tail those lovebirds for two weeks. The results were inconclusive. No motel rendezvous, no illicit humping in their cars, but they did frequently meet for drinks at the tavern on 89 when she told me she was shopping for office supplies or groceries. Practically

mugging each other in the photos. The detective offered me a cut-rate package to tap their phones and intercept email communications. I declined, paid him, and sent him on his way. He'd shown me enough. My imagination would do the rest.

Then I took that thumb drive of photos and locked myself in a room and brooded. As my dad would've said, I went into the garden and ate worms.

Moose have learned to steer wide of Moosehead Park. Hunters and redneck locals blast the poor critters the second one pokes its muzzle out of the woodwork. The park isn't all that park-like; really just an expanse of marsh and spruce copses in the shadow of the Chugach Mountains that got designated public use. Basically, the feds looked around for the armpit of the great outdoors and said, Fine, peasants. Enjoy! Thanks a lot, Jimmy Carter.

The government hacked a path through it, east to west. Take a step left or right and you're ass deep in devil's club or bog water. You would not believe the mosquitoes that rise in black and humming clouds. Spray on the chemicals, layer your clothes, throw netting over that and spray it too for good measure, and you're still fucked. Those tiny stabbing bastards will find a way to your tender flesh.

I stop by Monroe's house at dawn, load him and his gear, and then drive us to the trailhead. My truck is the only vehicle in the lot. Camping season is kaput and man-eating bug season has begun. This is early fall before the first hard freeze or fresh termination dust on the mountains. Any second now for one or both, however.

Monroe is a willowy fellow of Irish descent, so he slathers his pale skin with sunblock, then slips on a fancy vest he probably snagged off the rack the night before, and squeezes himself into a high tech pack with a slick neon yellow shell and enough elastic webbing to truss a moose, if we see one. It looks heavy and probably is since he's stuffed all of the camping gear in there. I carry my meager supplies, including a sixer of suds, in a rucksack. In my left hand I heft a fishing rod. Trout run in the streams yonder and I've a mind to hook a couple for dinner if the opportunity arises.

Ominous clouds sludge in from the east as we begin our trek. The plan is to hike a few hours, pitch the tent, and maybe recon the surrounding area. In the morning we'll head home. Nothing fancy, nor prolonged or grueling.

We rest periodically. I slug water from my dented canteen and lover boy pops the top on a wine cooler. The trail winds through barren hills and stands of black spruce. Gloom spreads its wings over the land. The air tastes damp, and yes sir, the mosquitoes and the gnats taste us.

No point in making this an epic: At last we reach a patch of dry ground on a hill and set camp. Tent, fire pit, the works. Monroe asks about bears, and he asks about them a lot. I'm not too worried as they tend to be fat and complacent this close to winter. Spring, when the beasts emerge lean and starved, is the dangerous time.

Nonetheless, I tell Monroe that dearie-me, we'd best be on guard against those man-eaters. I instruct him to keep trash and scraps in a sealed container to minimize ursine temptation, which is a sound idea, but fun to watch him perform as he casts worried glances into the underbrush. I scan the horizon and judge that indeed a storm was approaching, although the weather forecast has made no such mention.

I grab my fishing rod and tell him to fall in.

"Fishing? In this weather?" He cups his hand to catch the first raindrops.

"Morning is better. But it's okay. A little rain won't keep them from biting."

His expression is glum as he zips his fancy yellow pastel slicker that matches the glaring yellow backpack shell. The idea of hooking a fish doubtless hurts his tender feelings. I try not to sneer while thinking that Ferris had certainly gone the whole nine yards to find my opposite.

The map indicates a creek within a mile or so and I wade into the bushes, hapless Monroe on my heel. The possibility of a fresh trout fillet appeals. Moreover, it amuses me to let branches whip back at his face and hear his muffled exclamations. I chuckle and think of the skinning knife strapped to my hip. It's the journey, not the destination, right?

I almost trip headlong into the hole. Monroe saves me. He snatches my belt as I teeter on the crumbling brink, and yanks me back. Faster reflexes than

I'd have guessed. He has to use his entire bodyweight, and thus counterbalanced, we fall awkwardly among the alder and devil's club.

"What the hell is that?" he says.

"A hole in the ground," I say. Thorns in my shin, rain trickling down my neck, mosquitoes drilling every available surface, all conspire to provoke my ire. Not just a hole. Not a sinkhole, or an animal burrow, or anything of nature. Upturned clay rings the pit. Water seeps gray and orange from its rude walls.

"You know, it looks like a grave." He gains his feet and peers into the hole. "Holy shit. Somebody dug this thing not too long ago."

"It's not a grave. The shape is fubar."

"Yeah? That a rule? Gotta be six by six on the nose? Maybe they were in a hurry. Digging around big rocks. I'm telling you."

"Maybe a retarded hillbilly dug it."

Sarcastic as I might be, he has it right. This is a grave, albeit an oblong, off-kilter grave, six or seven feet deep and freshly dug. It doesn't matter that the shape is wrong; the hole radiates unmistakable purpose. I don't see a shovel or tracks. The latter bothers me. Should be tracks in the wet dirt. Should be more dirt. Should be broken branches. Anything. I'm not a tracker. Still the consistency of the clay, the wisps of steam, convince me that the mysterious digger did the deed and left within the past hour or two.

"Man, what do you think?" Monroe says with less worry and more eagerness than I like.

"I think we should mind our own business and get back to camp. Call it a day."

"Hold on." He swats away a cloud of mosquitoes. "I'm curious. Aren't you?"

"No, Monroe, not really. Either it's a grave, or it's not. If not, then who gives a shit? If it is, then presumably someone will be along presently to dump a corpse. I'd prefer to be elsewhere." I don't wait around to hold a debate. Hell with fishing. Nightfall looms and I want to put distance between us and that site. The need to get away is overpowering.

We make it back to base without incident. I feel Monroe's sulky gaze the whole way. I consider pulling stakes. The idea of folding the tent is unappetizing and impractical. Blundering through the forest in darkness is how tinhorns and Cheechakos wind up with busted legs or lost for a week. No thanks. I light a fire and boil water for the MREs I brought. Keep my trusty .9mm pistol handy, too. Rain starts pissing down for real. We huddle under a makeshift canopy of spruce boughs and a tarp. Blind and deaf, and choking on campfire smoke.

Isn't until after supper and a third brew that I realize I've forgotten about my half-assed plan to kill my little buddy.

Late that night I wake to the drum of rain on the tent fabric. Pitch black.

"Elmer," Monroe says. He sounds tense.

"Yeah?"

"Why'd you bring me here?"

"I didn't. You wanted to."

"Uh-uh. *You* wanted this."

"Monroe, shut the fuck up and let me sleep."

"Something occurred to me when I saw that grave. You made it. You made it and then brought me to it."

I lie very still. I smell the fear on his breath.

"Elmer?"

"Yeah?"

"Great minds think alike. This is for Ferris."

He sighs heavily next to me in the dark before smashing the rock down on my head.

You are stripped utterly naked when confronted by your own mortality. You are stripped utterly naked when you are dropped to the bottom of a hole and buried in the mud, handful by handful, and left to rot. The worms crawl in.

Two items from the grim days of my youth.

Dad and his brothers were into cockfighting. Many a blue-collar paycheck was won and lost on his prize Lubaang and Asil warrior birds. My people spent generations in El Paso and they'd picked up the sport from the Mexicans. Gorgeous destroyers, our fighting roosters. These weren't simple chickens like you see on a farm. A damn sight bigger and meaner than their domestic kin. Orange and black and sheened emerald, tall as a man's knee, and eager for violence. One glimpse and you could see the devil in them, you could trace the line of descent back to dinosaur raptors.

Dad taped razorblades and jags of glass to their spurs and turned them loose in a killing pit. Hell of a lot of blood and feathers, afterward. I liked the blood and the smell of the blood. The black feathers were my favorite. I gathered a bunch and made a war bonnet. A boy at school offended me and I pursued him in my war bonnet of orange and black feathers and threw him down and rubbed his face in the playground dirt.

In retrospect, Mom and little sister flying the coop, so to speak, when I was four, the cockfighting, boozy gambling, and a procession of whores that followed my dad around might've had an effect on me. Also, we relocated from Texas to Alaska. The main difference between the two states is the distinct lack of an electric chair in the Land of the Midnight Sun.

The other thing is, I could do a weird trick with my mind. Got hooked on the idea of telekinesis after reading an old science fiction novel called *The Power* about some dude with superhuman abilities. God alone can say how many hours I spent squinting in concentration. And it worked, sometimes. I tipped water glasses and caused electronic devices to go haywire without touching them. I could stop a clock by beaming death-thoughts at it. Once I concentrated hard enough to levitate a cinderblock about six inches above the garage floor. Dad stumbled upon me; I was out cold, bleeding from my nose and ears. A three day coma followed; doctors diagnosed it as epilepsy. Dear lord, the apocalyptic nightmares I suffered: oceans of blood, rivers of maggots, the damned leading the damned across plains of fire and ash. The damned pointing their crisped, skeletal fingers at me and wailing in unison.

Shot a silver streak through my hair. At least the girls thought it cute. I was too scared to screw around with ESP and telekinesis after that. Set it aside with other childish things.

There’s nothing dramatic about the transmogrification of lowly Elmer D. from dead meat into a walking and talking abomination unleashed upon the hapless people of the Earth. It occurs between one drip of rain from a spruce bough and the next. An owl glides in and snatches a squirrel. A cloud smokes across the face of the moon. The night takes a long breath, and then I am among all that is.

I have no memory of clawing up out of the muck, although it would be keen if my cadaverous hand had thrust free of the soil like in all those hoary old movies. One moment I lie interred in smothering blackness, the next I find myself striding through a twilight forest where mist hangs from evergreen branches. Gray upon gray. In this instant, I question nothing, I ponder nothing. My only goal is to plow forward into the infinite grayness.

A strange sensation to be plugged into every birdcall, every snapped twig, every stir of grass in the breeze, the scents of dead leaves, loam, and moose droppings; yet disconnected, numb. My body is a lead float, adrift. It oscillates between here and there, fat and thin. Hideously immense, yet helium light. I lurch, dragging my left foot. My power is enormous. I brush tree trunks and they crackle and uproot and crash.

Flames leap from a pile of logs. This clues me in to the fact it isn’t sunset or dawn, but rather the dark of night. My sight penetrates spectrums beyond the human norm. Constellations flare, white against gray. I *hear* the stars as a celestial chorus, molten atoms colliding and chiming.

Three hunters squat around the fire as men have done since saber tooth tigers prowled the land. A motor home is parked nearby. Electric light streams from the windows. I’ve crossed many miles in a blink to arrive in the parking lot. Sweat, beer, gun oil, I smell it all. Seven hundred yards to my left, an owl regurgitates the pellet of the squirrel it gobbled for dinner. I smell that too.

None of the hunters notice my apparition at the edge of the cheery circle of their fire. Unlike me, they can’t see in the dark. Soap bubbles form above the head of the nearest man. The bubble shimmers and expands. It contains images of a blue-collar truck commercial: happy children, barking dogs, muddy Fords, him sighting down on a bighorn ram and blasting it off a

ledge. Him plowing his stolid wife, blowing out the candles on a cake. That sort of deal. Once glance tells me the life story of Hunter Numero Uno.

A phantom approximation of his face swells the bubble. It whispers to me in the language of electron particles, “Master!”

I nearly swoon in an ecstasy of desire and my tongue lolls to my grimy navel. I am starved.

One by one, I seize them and crack their skulls and scoop out the brain matter and gulp it whole. Sparks sizzle and drip down my chin, light me up from the inside. For a few moments, before the incredible rush fades, I, as Whitman said, contain multitudes.

This transformation started long before the inciting incident in the hole. Maybe it had been occurring my entire life. Ten bucks says Dad’s sperm was already mutating when it plowed into Mom’s egg. He’d gotten spritzed with Agent Orange during his tour in Vietnam and suffered all kinds of health problems afterward. He drank, and so did Mom. There was also a sense of cursedness haunting the family line. Dad went in a wreck. Dad’s cousin was an ace Alaskan bush pilot who death-spiraled his Cessna into Lake Illiamna. An uncle was eaten up by cancer despite living a clean, Presbyterian life, no smokes, no booze. An aunt did ten years in the pen and got hit by a motorcyclist three days after her parole. Somebody else got shanked in a brawl at the Gold Digger, back when it *really* was a saloon with sawdust and a mechanical bull and full of motorcycle club thugs and crankheads looking to stab you in the kidney. My sister, she joined the FBI. Her name was Jeanie and last I saw her she was eighteen months and counting. Rumor is she went down in a corruption sting and sliced her wrists.

Dumb luck I didn’t pop out of the womb with two heads.

I like the idea that death is a transitory state; my passage from pupa to final instar. I’m a whole new insect. While the notion I’ve become posthuman sends my nerves a twanging, I’m not exactly afraid, or even concerned. Oh, a tiny fragment of the old me mewls and screeches in its cage, but to no greater effect than the whine of a fly under glass.

The Usurper deigns to answer my imprecations at one point.

We are the next big thing. This whisper issues from inside me; it oozes forth. The whisper is blood welling from a puncture. Sexless, dispassionate. *We are Omega, we are Kingdom Come. We have always been, we will always be*. I receive a picture, muddy and flickering, of warm seas and green light, of trilobites and worms and moss. Dinosaurs have not been invented, but the devil is everywhere.

We are the apparatus. We are the apex. We are first.

I cannot reply. I'm trying to decide if apex means precisely what it intimates and if it's something I want to be (*of course you do, you ninny!*). Again, images coalesce from the ether, like bursts of speech through shortwave static. The future unravels in an arc of projectile vomit from the jaws of Saturn: an approaching tsunami of blood and peeled flesh and more blood. A thousand feet tall, rolling at a thousand miles per hour. The first of many such waves. Wave after wave of carnage, and me in gigantic repose atop a heap of bones. My friends and foes, beneath me at last!

Ferris is fucking Monroe. We don't have to take that kind of bullshit. We should fix their wagons. We are the apparatus. We are the way.

That sounds reasonable. A man should attend his priorities. Family comes first.

I loved monster movies as a kid. Don't all boys love monster movies?

Dawn of the Dead. *Evil Dead*. *Reanimator*. *From Beyond*. *The Fly*. *The Thing*. Right on. I dug it, especially zombie flicks. The shambling undead did it for me.

Had my first hot and heavy teen make out session with Julie Vellum during a screening of *Night of the Living Dead* at her dad's split-level Girdwood house. I'd seen the movie plenty of times, but this was super-fucking-hot cheerleader Julie Vellum, shag rugs, a leather couch, and her pop's brand new Magnavox television we were talking about. That's why Mr. V tolerated me sniffing around his princess that lost summer of my junior year in high school—like me, he was a devout fan of classic fright features. Val Lewton and George Romero were unto gods in Mr. V's estimation. Death gods, I thought, but kept such smart-ass observations to myself by concentrating upon the sky-high hemline of his daughter's skirt.

The three of us camped on that giant couch. Me on one end, Julie on the other, her dad, larger than life, occupying the middle. We kids sipped bottles of Coke while Mr. V blasted his way through a fifth of Maker's Mark and talked over all the good parts. Soon, he slurred and blessedly lengthy gaps interrupted his monologue. He rose and staggered toward the kitchen in quest of more booze. There followed a series of thuds and then a crash that shook the living room.

"Holy shit!" I said.

"Oh, don't worry. That's just him passing out. He does it all the time." Julie gave me a cat-eyed look. Two seconds later we met in the middle. She kissed me as my hands went roaming places they had no business, and then she jacked me off like she'd done it before.

I made it with Julie a half dozen times before school started again. Once the frost set in, she dropped me like a bad habit. Despite my momentary anguish, it was for the best. White trash, both of us. However, she had a little money, and that made all the difference. She also carried a torch for the quarterback on our football team. Beating his ass wouldn't have been a problem; I was really good at inflicting pain by then. Size and meanness were on my side, although I made certain to keep the latter under wraps. My gambit was to smile and keep my mouth shut whenever possible. Didn't matter. Most everyone was piss-scared of me for reasons they couldn't express. The assholes voted me most likely to wind up in prison or in an early grave.

This was why I suppressed my rage, and why I let JV saunter into the sunset with her trophy jock. The things I envisioned doing in the name of love would've landed me in Goose Bay Penitentiary or a nuthouse. Instead, I went into the garden and ate worms and went quietly mad exactly as the moldy poets from pen and quill days had done.

Nightmares afflicted me with a vengeance I hadn't experienced since adolescence. Who knows what precipitated them. Stress? Hormones? Whatever the case, these were the stuff of legends. Imagine being trapped inside a waxworks dedicated to atrocities, and all the doors sealed. Horrors from pre-adolescence reinvented themselves into subtler, more sophisticated iterations freighted with guilt and shame. My nightmares had

matured and they took a cat-o'-nine-tails to my psyche. I was visited every night for several months.

The phenomenon leaked into waking life. I became gaunt, pallid, and terser than ever. I forced myself to wear a shit-eating grin while secretly worrying that I'd gone around the bend. I began to hallucinate. At school I caught glimpses of my classmates and teachers wearing death masks. Some were pale and serene, others contorted and agonized, and still others dripping blood, or caved in, or sheared away entirely to expose the cavern of the mind.

The unexpected result of this being that I got better with my own mask, more scrupulous about tightening the bolts. Even so, it's a miracle I kept a straight face while gazing at exposed brains or punctured eyeballs. I got good at nodding and smiling.

Nonetheless, a particular incident almost undid me. One morning during passing period Julie's locker door was open and for some reason, don't know what the hell I was thinking, I eased on over to chat her up. Second week of school, me being lonely and horny, not in my right mind, which covers any teenage boy, but me more so. The door swung shut and there she stood, enfolded in the jock's arms, playing tonsil hockey. The bell broke up their tryst and they sauntered away, not acknowledging my presence as I stared after them.

I didn't feel anything, the exact same way I didn't feel anything the time Dad got drunk and slugged me in the jaw and laid me on my ass. The same lights flickered in the dark regions of my mind, the same roar of distant wind rose in my ears. The locker and a section of the concrete floor dissolved as if by acid. A hole bored into the earth and I had an erection that nearly split my pants. No nosebleed this time around. I was afraid, though. Terrified enough that I got away and got drunk on Dad's stock of Old Crow, damn the consequences were he to discover the theft, and I made myself forget. But the nightmares. Jesus. Jesus.

Dogged, simpleminded stubbornness got me though the autumn more or less intact, and largely unscarred.

What *scarred* me was getting ejected face-first through the windshield of Dad's 1982 Chevy that winter. He hit a patch of ice and left the road doing

around sixty-five and smacked a berm of snow packed tight as concrete by the state road graders. Never a compulsive buckler of seatbelts, I flew over the berm and burrowed into the virgin snow beyond. Dad burned up with the Chevy. Odd, how of all the folks that were rendered a horror show in my visions, I hadn't ever seen his death mask until I glimpsed him through the flames and melting glass.

No more nightmares for a long, long time after that incident. No dreams of any kind. Sleep became a chrysalis.

Apparently, a side effect of apex prowess is peckishness. The Glenn Highway spreads before me, a glistening buffet table strung with cozy sodium lights for mood.

Whatever manipulates me is not traveling of its own volition so much as being pulled as a steel filing by the mother of all magnets. The delays and digressions are but zigzag deviations of a neutron star as it's dragged into a black hole.

In any event, I zig through a rest stop near Eagle River and am compelled to annihilate the dozen or so inhabitants. Well, I *say* compelled—it's not as if I require much arm-twisting.

I wrench doors from semi-trucks, and peel the roofs off compact cars. I am a beast cracking oyster shells. My need is overwhelming, my appetite is profound. I lick eyes from sockets, then the brains, the guts, the cracked-from-the-bone marrow, and even swallow a few bones whole. I expand and contract, I divide and reform. I squirm and slash. I am a pit that is everywhere. Light bends around me, or it is consumed.

A handful of survivors flee into the dour Plexiglas and cement octagon with a stylized eagle blazoned on the sloped roof. My reflection warps against the glass, or perhaps warps the glass itself. A cockscomb of jagged flint erupts from the sundered dome of my cranium. Spurs of razor-tipped basalt extrude from my wrists, elbows, and knees. Even as I take in its ghastly splendor, my physiognomy alters and is transfigured into something far worse, something that overwhelms my capacity to articulate its awfulness.

I am resplendently dire. I am a figure of awe. I am a horror.

They barricade the entrance with soda machines and that delays me for a few seconds once I finish outside. I find them cowering and gibbering prayers under Formica tables and in bathroom stalls. Somebody stabs me with a hunting knife, somebody else plugs me with a small caliber handgun. Six or seven teeny popgun flashes in the dark among the roaring and screaming. It hardly matters.

Toward the end, I flop, maw agape, on the concrete floor at the end of the demolished gallery and let that sweet hot stream of blood and viscera roll down my gullet. Overhead, the lights flicker crazily and shadows rip themselves apart.

When it's finished, I shamble forth from the despoiled building. Pasted in gore and excrement, crowned by a garland of intestines, I strike a Jesus Christ pose in the center of the highway.

Traffic routes around me, makes me consider the legend of the stampeding buffalo herd breaking around a man if he remains motionless and tall in his boots. The sun arcs across the sky four times, and so swiftly it sheds tracers of flame. A green-gold ball of bubbling gas, a bacterium in division. The amoeba sun segments in rhythm with my own squamous brain cells. The sun strobes and vanishes. The sliver moon swings down and sinks into my breast, cold as a fang of ice. That which nests within my DNA blooms and reticulates as it rewrites parameters of operation.

The city awaits.

I project myself forward along a corridor of alternating light and darkness, contract through a crimson doorway, and into a dance hall. My need to gorge is satiated and replaced by an urge I don't recognize. A wormhole opens behind my left eye. The void shivers and yearns; it lusts for sensation.

Music dies as the DJ apprehends me with his bemused gaze. Then the dancing. All heads turn toward my dreadful countenance.

What happens at the Gold Digger Saloon. I cannot speak of it. The ecstasy is the sun going nova in my brain. Nova, then collapsing inward, a snow crystal flaking, disintegrating, and then nothing left except a point of

darkness, the wormy head of a black strand that bores its way to the core of everything.

We aren't rich. The pool house is our compromise—as long as Ferris didn't push for a mother-in-law cottage, I'd see she had herself a full-length heated pool to do laps. Ferris was on the swim team in high school and college and she's tried valiantly to maintain her form. The YMCA is a no go. Too many sluggish old people in the lane, too many screaming kids, too many creepy dudes in the bleachers. Thus, the pool house. A gesture of defiance in the face of brutal Alaska winters.

I enter through the skylight. A long dead star field turns and burns over my shoulder. The coals that were stars sigh.

Ferris lies naked and icy pale against the dappled green water. Her eyes are closed. Occasionally her arms and legs scissor languidly. Beneath her, is her seal shadow and the white tile that slopes away into haziness. Vapors shift across her body and carry its scent to me, sharp and clean amid the faint tang of chlorine. She daydreams on the cusp of sleep and I taste the procession of phantoms that illuminate her inner landscape. Mine is not among them.

I descend as if a great spider on its wire, then stop and hang in place. This thing that has hijacked and reconstituted my body, reduced my consciousness and placed it in a bell jar, is drawn to her. More specifically, that which I have become is drawn to something *within* her. I don't comprehend the intricacies. I can only bear mute witness to the spectacle as it unfolds.

A black spot stains at the bottom of the pool. The spot spreads across the white bed, a ring of darkness widening as pieces of tile crumble into the depths. It is a pit, slackening directly below my lovely, frigid wife. My betrayer wife, my arm extending, my claw, hollow as a siphon, its shadow upon her betrayer's face, and the abyssal trench an iris beneath. Wife, come along to Kingdom Come, come to the underworld.

Her eyes snap open.

"I didn't fuck him," she says. "I fantasized about it, plenty."

Monroe is absent from the scene, and that's a shame. Every pore in me longs to drink his blood, to liquefy him, fry him, to have his heart in my fist. To ram his heart down her throat.

"I didn't fuck him. Elmer, I didn't. I should've."

Her blood. His blood. Their atoms.

I open my mouth (maw) to accuse, to excoriate, and the dead song of the dead stars worms out. But she doesn't blink, she repeats that she hasn't fucked him, hasn't fucked him. She projects her innocence in an electromagnetic cone meant to kill. She is entirely too composed, this fragile sack of skin and water.

She says, "Are you here to hurt me, Elmer?" Her smile is pitiless, it cuts. "The time you came home drunk and forced me? There's a word for you, hon. Don't you remember what you've done?"

I don't remember. I seethe.

Difficult to concentrate through the interference of her thoughts that explain via pointillism how Monroe opportunistically slaughtered me and then so much like the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" had succumbed to guilt and paranoia and eventually fled the country. The FBI hunts him in connection with my disappearance. He could be anywhere. She suspects Mexico. Monroe always had a romanticized notion about Mexico and what he could do there, a super gringo lover man.

The little shit swallowed her teary stories of my cruelty and violence. He'd done me in as an act of vengeance. An act that only earned Ferris's contempt. She is utterly my creature and let no man cast asunder what all the powers above and below had seen fit to forge.

I convulse with a complicated longing and snatch for her. She's too quick. She rolls, sleek and white, and flashes downward amid a cloud of bubbles into the pit. Fool that I am, I follow.

We meet in darkness, each illuminated by a weak spotlight that dims and brightens with our breathing. I sense immense coldness and space pressing against the bubble where we reside. I am whole. My cloven skull and rotting flesh are restored. My mind is papered over with gold star stickers and crepe.

She points an automatic pistol at me. I understand that it’s a present from her would-be lover. The barrel aligns with my eye. I have traveled through the barrel and been deposited in this limbo.

“I warned him. Told him he’d never succeed. If I couldn’t kill you, then there was no hope for him.” She laughs and shakes the wet hair from her eyes. “Arsenic in your coffee every day for three months. Nothing. For God’s sake, I frosted your birthday cake with rat poison.”

Now that she mentions it, now that her thoughts bleed into mine, I recall the bitter coffee, the odd aftertaste of the icing on my last cake. A skull and crossbones has hung over our marriage for years. Yet, I remain. What does it mean?

“I hurt you, but I couldn’t kill you. Monroe couldn’t. Nobody can. You died in childhood. Maybe you were never born. Maybe the parasite that fruits your corpse is the only true part of you that existed.”

Am I merely a figment? If so, I am the most rapacious, carnivorous, and vengeful figment she will have the misfortune to encounter. I strike aside the gun and reach for her. A black halo of light manifests around Ferris. Her arms spread wide and she becomes the very figure of a dread and terrible insect queen. The enormity of her eclipses my own.

She clutches me and the sting slides in. “It was always here, love. In all of us, always.”

It’s apparent that I’ve miscalculated again.

Reality has bent and bent. I look past the nimbus of black flame into her cold eyes. Reality just goes right ahead and comes apart.

Darkness rolls back to daylight. It’s spring and balmy. The breeze is redolent with sweet green sap and the bloom of roses. Guests and children of the guests clutter a lawn that’s too bright and too green to be real. “Death to Everyone” by good old Will Oldham crackles over the speakers. I’m stuffed into a poorly fitted tux. At my side, Ferris shines as radiantly white as the Queen of Winter.

I have seen this, relived this, in a thousand-thousand nightmares.

My hand overlaps hers as we saw the blade into that multi-tiered cake. She opens her mouth and bites through the icing, the bunting, and my brittle soul. I shudder and kiss her. It feels no different than kissing ice bobbed up from the bottom of an arctic lake. She inhales my heat and my vitality before I can inhale hers. She's always been stronger, in the only way that counts. She always will be stronger.

Oldham's voice fades and the guests stare at us in hushed expectation.

Nearby, a little girl in a black funeral dress begins to sing the "Hearse Song" to the boy she's tormenting with malice or affection, take your pick:

"They put you in a big black box

And cover you up with dirt and rocks.

All goes well for about a week,

Then your coffin begins to leak.

The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out,

The worms play pinochle in your snout,

They eat your eyes, they eat your nose,

They eat the jelly between your toes."

This time around, I do what I should've in the first place all those lost years ago. Instead of cutting a piece for the first guest in line, I grip the knife and slice my throat. Blood fans the cake and Ferris's white dress. She throws back her head and laughs. I sink to my knees in the thirsty grass. The sun pales and contracts to a black-limned ring. Red shadows pour through the trees, drench the lawn, and reduce the paralyzed spectators to negatives. I try to speak. Worms crawl out.

Ferris's parents loved me. I first met them during Thanksgiving when she and I stayed over at the family casa—Ferris slept in her old room with the Prince poster and a mountain of heart-shaped pillows and teddy bears while

I bunked in the basement on a leather sofa between her old man's pool table and a gun safe.

There was a tense moment when she removed her shades and revealed the Lichtenburg flower of a purple knot under her eye. Ferris was so very smooth. She spun a story about getting kicked in the face during swim practice, and her family bought it. She wasn't speaking to *me* except as required, probably hadn't even decided whether to stay with me or toss her engagement ring into the trash.

Hell of it was, at that early stage in our romance I didn't care much either way.

Turkey, gravy, pumpkin pie, and afterward, a quart of Jim Beam passed around a circle of a half-dozen of Ferris's menfolk. Salt of the earth bumpkins who raised coon dogs and revved the engines on four-wheelers at the gravel pit and picked through piles at the dump for fun.

You like John Wayne? one truck-driving uncle wanted to know. Shore as hail, I love the Duke! And with that, I was in like Flynn. My lumberjack beard, plaid coat, and knowledge of professional football didn't go amiss, either.

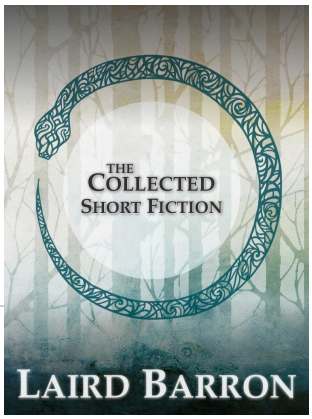
Her dad welcomed me to the family with teary eyes and a bear hug. I wasn't "nothin' like them pussies she usually brings home from college." How right my future in-law hillbillies were! Not three days before that Clampett-style feast I'd beaten a UAA fraternity brother within an inch of his life for giving me the stink eye as I staggered home from the Gold Digger Saloon. I made the letter-sweater-wearing jock try to eat a parking meter. The whole time Ferris's family exchanged jocular crudities at the supper table, my hand was in my pocket, caressing the frat boy's braces, with a few teeth still stuck in them, like a God-fearing Catholic fondling his rosary. It was the only thing that kept me from stabbing one of those bozos with a steak knife.

I gave the lot of those silly, inbred bastards my best aw-shucks grin, and daydreamed about how lovely and charred their slack-jawed skulls would shine from the cinders of a three a.m. house fire.

Aided by booze and a vivid imagination, I survived dinner and into the following day. Driving home, the stars were blacked. Snow fell like a sonofabitch. Every now and again the tires slipped against ice and the truck shook. Dad's ghost muttered in my ear. My heart knocked and I forgot to blink for at least forty miles. The high beams carved a tunnel into the blizzard. Patsy Cline came on the radio out of Anchorage. Patsy sang "Crazy" and that was our song, all right.

Ferris reached across the gulf from the passenger side and held my hand. Her fingers clamped cold and tight over mine. In the rearview there was nothing but darkness, snowflakes endlessly collapsing in our wake, and a black slick of road painted red in the taillights' glow.

the worms crawl in,



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the worms crawl out. The worms play Pinochle on your snout.

We chanted that at mock funerals when I was a kid. Shoot your sister playing cowboys and Indians and she fell dead, that's your dirge. The playground bully challenges you to a duel after class, that's the ditty your friends hummed as the hour of doom approached.

Hadn't heard the worm song since I was twelve, but it's coming back into style, thanks to my wrath. I've been done a great wrong, you see. Done a great injustice by a man named Monroe. However, I've come to think of him as Fortunato. It makes me smile to do so.

He "tricks" me into going on the hiking trip. I've always had a hate-hate relationship with the great outdoors. Bad enough I'm stuck working nine to five in the weather; camping is a deal breaker. My feelings don't matter. He's as smooth as a magician or a shrink: talks about one thing, shows you one thing, but there's always another something up his sleeve. He knows his con, short or long. Can't dazzle 'em with brilliance, baffle 'em with bullshit, is his motto. Much as the hand is quicker than the eye, Monroe's bullshit usually defies my perception of it until after the fact when it's time to cry.

Phase one of the scam, he invites Ferris and me over to the house for a barbeque. Optimistically, I assume that's merely a cover to regale us with his latest sexual exploits, and yes, Monroe does chortle over a couple of girlfriends he has squirming on the hook, each completely ignorant of the other. But it turns out that this gloating is actually a pretext to maneuver me into a conversation about Moosehead Park and its fabulous game trails.

So, Elmer, you hunt, right? You lived in the woods when you were a kid. The only way he could know that, since I've never mentioned it, is from Ferris. And of course, I correct him. My dad had been the big white hunter in the family; the rest of us were simply dragged along for the ride. Monroe believes in education via osmosis. It isn't hunting that intrigues him. He is far too much of a wilting flower to lay hands on a rifle, much less put a bullet into the brainpan of some hapless animal. He needs street cred, as it were, wants to butch up his résumé with the ladies, and a brief foray into the swamps of south central Alaska is the cure for what ails him. First rule of disappearing into the wilderness is, always bring a buddy.

We chew some ribs, toss back a few brews, and thus plied with meat and drink I agree to tag along this very next Saturday for an overnight campout. It has to be me. Not a chance any of his colleagues will blow a perfectly good weekend with the shifty motherfucker. Plenty of them will gather for a free feed and trade shop gossip, but that is the extent of it. Dude probably thinks he's really clever, manipulating his lummox of a pal, albeit pal might be too strong a word.

Joke's on him. I'm not as dim as I pretend. The trip is exactly what I want. It's my big chance to settle the score.

Ferris doesn't say anything. She *looks* plenty worried. I pretend not to notice. Can't have her suspecting that I suspect she suspects I *know* there is something going on between her and Monroe. In that unguarded moment, her expression says she thinks her boyfriend is out of his gourd, putting himself at the mercy of a paranoid husband who can load a six-hundred-pound engine block barehanded. Alas, Monroe's downfall is his unremitting narcissism. He doesn't want to get away with snaking my wife, he wants to rub my nose in it.

If Ferris were to get a whiff of my true mood she'd forbid Monroe's excursion under no uncertain terms and spoil everything. Although, even in her most febrile visions, it's doubtful she could imagine I plan to off him in some devious manner and drop the body into a deep, dark pit. One of my flaws is jealousy. Not the biggest of them, either, not that she has the first inkling. We've been together since our late twenties. Going on fifteen years, and parts of me remain Terra Incognita to my lovely wife. See, there are

some things you should know about me, things I should get out in the open. I won't, though.

Not until later.

Ferris worked as an administrative assistant at the high school where Monroe taught English. Fancied himself a poet, did our man Monroe. A skinny, weepy fella who preened as if his scraggly beard made him kin to Redford's Liver-Eating-Johnson and that his sonnets were worthy of Neruda.

Sonnets, for the love of God.

Ferris started bringing the shit home in a special folder, wanted my "professional" opinion. I'm no expert, I drill wells for a living. But sure, I published a few pieces in lit journals over the years, had one chapbook about blood and vengeance picked up by Pudding House when I was younger and angrier. I read Monroe's poems, told her what I thought of them, which wasn't much. Classic poseur artiste. The kind of asshole who upon learning he can't strum a guitar to any effect minors in poetry or fiction to impress the doe-eyed girls who hang around coffee houses and the bored ones at faculty parties. One of those, *I'm writing a book* shitheads who isn't really doing any such thing.

Everybody hates those guys.

Guys who kiss married women on the mouth aren't too popular either. Even though I was likely the last to know, I'd finally gotten wise at Monroe's Fourth of July house party. A fateful glimpse of him and Ferris in a window reflection was a splash of cold water for sure. Shielded by an open refrigerator door, both of them leaning in for a beer, and by God, Monroe laid it on her. The door swung closed and they acted casual. Cheeks a bit rosier, laughter a notch too sharp, and that was all. I played the oblivious fool. Wasn't tough; waves of numbness filled me, that big old local anesthetic of the gods. It was as if the enemy had dropped depth charges. Those bombs sink real deep before detonating. First time I'd ever thought of Ferris as an enemy.

I didn’t fly into a rage or fall into despair. Nah, my reaction was to get chummy with Monroe. I fucked Ferris more often and a lot more vigorously than was my habit. Also, I took some dough from a rainy day account and paid my pal Benny Three-Trees, a dope dealer who moonlighted as a private eye, to tail those lovebirds for two weeks. The results were inconclusive. No motel rendezvous, no illicit humping in their cars, but they did frequently meet for drinks at the tavern on 89 when she told me she was shopping for office supplies or groceries. Practically mugging each other in the photos. The detective offered me a cut-rate package to tap their phones and intercept email communications. I declined, paid him, and sent him on his way. He’d shown me enough. My imagination would do the rest.

Then I took that thumb drive of photos and locked myself in a room and brooded. As my dad would’ve said, I went into the garden and ate worms.

Moose have learned to steer wide of Moosehead Park. Hunters and redneck locals blast the poor critters the second one pokes its muzzle out of the woodwork. The park isn’t all that park-like; it’s an expanse of marsh and spruce copses in the shadow of the Chugach Mountains that got designated public use. Basically, the feds looked around for the armpit of the great outdoors and said, Fine, peasants. Enjoy! Thanks a lot, Jimmy Carter.

The government hacked a path through it, east to west. Take a step left or right and you’re ass deep in devil’s club or bog water. You would not believe the mosquitoes that rise in black and humming clouds. Spray on the chemicals, layer your clothes, throw netting over that and spray it too for good measure, and you’re still fucked. Those tiny stabbing bastards will find a way to your tender flesh.

I stop by Monroe’s house at dawn, load him and his gear, and then drive us to the trailhead. My truck is the only vehicle in the lot. Camping season is kaput and blood-sucking bug season has begun. This is early fall before the first hard freeze or fresh termination dust on the mountains. Any second now for one or both, however.

Monroe is a willowy fellow of Irish descent, so he slathers his pale skin with sunblock, dons a fancy vest he probably snagged off the rack the night

before, and squeezes himself into a high tech pack with a slick neon yellow shell and enough elastic webbing to truss a moose, if we see one. It looks heavy and probably is since he's stuffed all of the camping gear in there. I carry my meager supplies, including a sixer of suds, in a rucksack. In my offhand I heft a fishing rod. Trout run in the streams yonder and I've a mind to hook a couple for dinner if the opportunity arises.

Ominous clouds sludge in from the east as we begin our trek. The plan is to hike a few hours, pitch the tent, and maybe recon the surrounding area. In the morning we'll head home. Nothing fancy, nor prolonged or grueling. We rest periodically. I slug water from my dented canteen and lover boy pops the top on a wine cooler. The trail winds through barren hills and stands of black spruce. Gloom spreads its wings over the land. The air tastes damp, and yes sir, the mosquitoes and the gnats taste us.

No point in making this an epic: At last we reach a patch of dry ground on a hill and set camp. Tent, fire pit, the works. Monroe asks about bears, and he asks about them a lot. I'm not too worried as they tend to be fat and complacent this close to winter. Spring, when the beasts emerge lean and starved, is the dangerous time.

I tell Monroe that dearie-me, we'd best be on guard against those man-eaters. I instruct him to keep trash and scraps in a sealed container to minimize ursine temptation, which is a sound idea, but fun to watch him perform as he casts worried glances into the underbrush. I scan the horizon and judge that indeed a storm is approaching, although the weather forecast has made no such mention.

I grab my fishing rod and tell him to fall in.

"Fishing? In this weather?" He cups his hand to catch the first raindrops.

"Morning is better. But it's okay. A little rain won't keep them from biting."

His expression is glum as he zips his fancy yellow pastel slicker that matches the glaring yellow backpack shell. The idea of hooking a fish doubtless hurts his tender feelings. I try not to sneer while thinking that Ferris had certainly gone the whole nine yards to find my opposite.

The map indicates a creek within a mile or so and I wade into the bushes, hapless Monroe on my heel. The possibility of a fresh trout fillet appeals. It amuses me to let branches whip back at his face and hear his muffled

exclamations. I chuckle and think of the skinning knife strapped to my hip. It's the journey, not the destination, right?

I almost trip headlong into the hole. Monroe saves me. He snatches my belt as I teeter on the crumbling brink, and yanks me back. Faster reflexes than I'd have guessed. He has to use his entire bodyweight, and thus counterbalanced, we fall awkwardly among the alder and devil's club.

"What the hell is that?" he says.

"A hole in the ground," I say. Thorns in my shin, rain trickling down my neck, mosquitoes drilling every available surface, all conspire to provoke my ire. I'm wrong. This is more than a sinkhole, or an animal burrow, or anything of nature. Upturned clay rings the pit. Water seeps gray and orange from its rude walls.

"You know, it looks like a grave." He gains his feet and peers into the hole. "Oh, man. Somebody dug this thing not too long ago."

"It's not a grave. The shape is fubar."

"Yeah? That a rule? Gotta be six by six on the nose? Maybe they were in a hurry. Digging around big rocks. I'm telling you."

"Maybe a retarded hillbilly dug it."

Sarcastic as I might be, he has it right. This is a grave, albeit an oblong, off-kilter grave, six or seven feet deep and freshly dug. It doesn't matter that the shape is wrong; the hole radiates unmistakable purpose the way an empty slaughterhouse or jail cell radiates unmistakable purpose. I don't see a shovel or tracks. The latter bothers me. Should be tracks in the wet dirt. Should be more dirt. Should be broken branches. Something; anything. I'm not a tracker. Yet, the consistency of the clay, the wisps of steam, convince me that the mysterious digger did the deed and left within the past hour or two.

"Man, what do you think?" Monroe says with less worry and more eagerness than I like.

"I think we should mind our own business and get back to camp. Call it a day."

"Hold on." He swats away a cloud of mosquitoes. "I'm curious. Aren't you?"

“No, Monroe, not really. Either it’s a grave, or it’s not. If not, then who gives a shit? If it is, then presumably someone will be along presently to dump a corpse. I’d prefer to be elsewhere.” I don’t wait around to hold a debate. Hell with fishing. Nightfall looms and I want to put distance between us and that site. The need to get away is overpowering.

We make it back to base without incident. I feel Monroe’s sulky gaze the whole way. I consider pulling stakes. The idea of folding the tent is unappetizing and impractical. Blundering through the forest in darkness is how tinhorns and Cheechakos wind up with busted legs or lost for a week. No thanks. I light a fire and boil water for the MREs I brought. Keep my trusty .9mm pistol handy, too. Rain starts pissing down for real. We huddle under a makeshift canopy of spruce boughs and a tarp. Blind and deaf, and choking on campfire smoke.

Isn’t until after supper and a third brew that I realize I’ve forgotten about my half-assed plan to kill my little buddy.

Late that night I wake to the drum of rain on tarp. Pitch black.

“Elmer.” Monroe sounds tense.

“Yeah?”

“Why’d you bring me here?”

“I didn’t. You wanted to.”

“Uh-uh. *You* wanted this.”

“Monroe, shut the fuck up and let me sleep.”

“Something occurred to me when I saw that grave. You made it. You made it and then brought me to it.”

I lie very still. I smell the fear on his breath.

“Elmer?”

“Yeah?”

“Great minds think alike. This is for Ferris.”

He sighs heavily in the dark before smashing the rock down on my head.

You are stripped utterly naked when confronted by your own mortality. You are stripped utterly naked when you are dropped to the bottom of a hole and buried in the mud, handful by handful, and left to rot. The worms crawl in.

Two items from the grim days of my youth.

Dad and his brothers were into cockfighting. Many a blue-collar paycheck was won and lost on his prize Lubaang and Asil warrior birds. My people spent generations in El Paso and they'd picked up the sport from the Mexicans. Gorgeous destroyers, our fighting roosters. These weren't simple chickens like you see on a farm. A damn sight bigger and meaner than their domestic kin. Orange and black and sheened emerald, tall as a man's knee, and eager for violence. One glimpse and you could see the devil in them, you could trace the line of descent back to dinosaur raptors.

Dad taped razorblades and jags of glass to their spurs and turned them loose in a killing pit. Hell of a lot of blood and feathers, afterward. I liked the blood and the smell of the blood. The black feathers were my favorite. I gathered a bunch and made a war bonnet. A boy at school offended me and I pursued him in my war bonnet of orange and black feathers and threw him down and rubbed his face in the playground dirt.

In retrospect, Mom and little sister flying the coop—so to speak—when I was four, the cockfighting, boozy gambling, and a procession of whores that followed my dad around might've had an effect on me. Also, we relocated from Texas to Alaska. The main difference between the two states is the distinct lack of an electric chair in the Land of the Midnight Sun.

The other thing is, I could do a weird trick with my mind. Got hooked on the idea of telekinesis after reading an old science fiction novel called *The Power* about some dude with superhuman abilities. God alone can say how many hours I spent squinting in concentration. And it worked, sometimes. I tipped water glasses and caused electronic devices to go haywire without touching them. I could stop a clock by beaming death-thoughts at it. Once I concentrated hard enough to levitate a cinderblock about six inches above the garage floor. Dad stumbled upon me; I was out cold, bleeding from my nose and ears. A three-day coma followed; doctors diagnosed it as epilepsy.

Dear lord, the apocalyptic nightmares I suffered: Oceans of blood, rivers of maggots, the damned leading the damned across plains of fire and ash. The damned pointing their crisped, skeletal fingers at me and wailing in unison.

Shot a silver streak through my hair. At least the girls thought it cute. I was too scared to screw around with ESP and telekinesis after that. Set it aside with other childish things.

There's nothing dramatic about the transmogrification of lowly Elmer D. from dead meat into a walking and talking abomination unleashed upon the hapless people of the Earth. It occurs between one drip of rain from a spruce bough and the next. An owl glides in and snatches a squirrel. A cloud smokes across the face of the moon. The night takes a long breath, and then I am among all that is.

I have no memory of clawing up out of the muck, although it would be keen if my cadaverous hand had thrust free of the soil like in all those old movies. One moment I lie interred in smothering blackness, the next I find myself striding through a twilight forest where mist hangs from evergreen branches. Gray upon gray. In this instant, I question nothing, I ponder nothing. My only goal is to plow forward into the infinite grayness.

A strange sensation to be plugged into every birdcall, every snapped twig, every stir of grass in the breeze, the scents of dead leaves, loam, and moose droppings; yet disconnected, numb. My body is a lead float, adrift. It oscillates between here and there, and fat and thin. Hideously immense, yet helium light. I lurch, dragging my left foot. My power is enormous. I brush tree trunks and they crackle and uproot and crash.

Flames leap from a pile of logs. This clues me in to the fact it isn't sunset or dawn, but rather the dark of night. My sight penetrates spectrums beyond the human norm. Constellations flare, white against gray. I *hear* the stars as a celestial chorus, molten atoms colliding and chiming.

Three hunters squat around the fire as men have done since saber-tooth tigers prowled the land. A motor home is parked nearby. Electric light streams from the windows. I've crossed many miles in a blink to arrive in the parking lot. Sweat, beer, gun oil, I smell it all. Seven hundred yards to

my left, an owl regurgitates the pellet of the squirrel it gobbled for dinner. I smell that too.

None of the hunters notice my apparition at the edge of the cheery circle of their fire. Unlike me, they can't see in the dark. Soap bubbles form above the head of the nearest man. The bubbles shimmer and expand. They contain images of a blue-collar truck commercial: happy children, barking dogs, muddy Fords; him sighting down on a bighorn ram and blasting it off a ledge; him plowing his stolid wife, blowing out the candles on a cake; that sort of deal. One glance tells me the life story of Hunter Numero Uno.

A phantom approximation of his face swells the last unburst bubble. It whispers to me in the language of electron particles, "Master!"

I nearly swoon in an ecstasy of desire and my tongue lolls to my grimy navel. I am starved.

One by one, I seize them and crack their skulls and scoop out the brain matter and gulp it whole. Sparks sizzle and drip down my chin, light me up from the inside. For a few moments, before the incredible rush fades, I, as Whitman said, contain multitudes.

This transformation started long before the inciting incident in the hole. Maybe it had been occurring my entire life. Ten bucks says Dad's sperm was already mutating when it t-boned Mom's egg. He'd gotten spritzed with Agent Orange during his tour in Vietnam and suffered all kinds of health problems afterward. He drank, and so did Mom. There was also a sense of cursedness haunting the family line. Dad went in a wreck. Dad's cousin was an ace Alaskan bush pilot who death spiraled his Cessna into Lake Illiamna. An uncle was eaten up by cancer despite living a clean, Presbyterian life, no smokes, no booze. An aunt did ten years in the pen and got hit by a motorcyclist three days after her parole. Somebody else got shanked in a brawl at the Gold Digger, back when it *really* was a saloon with sawdust and a mechanical bull and full of motorcycle club thugs and crank heads looking to stab you in the kidney. My sister, she joined the FBI. Her name was Jeanie and last I saw her she was eighteen months and

counting. Rumor is she went down in a corruption sting and sliced her wrists.

Dumb luck I didn't pop out of the womb with two heads.

I like the idea that death is a transitory state; my passage from pupa to final instar. I'm a whole new insect. While the notion I've become posthuman sends my nerves a-twanging, I'm not exactly afraid, or even concerned. Oh, a tiny fragment of the old me mewls and screeches in its cage, but to no greater effect than the whine of a fly under glass.

The Usurper deigns to answer my imprecations at one point.

We are the next big thing. This whisper issues from inside me; it oozes forth. The whisper is blood welling from a puncture. Sexless, dispassionate. *We are Omega, we are Kingdom Come. We have always been; we will always be.* I receive a picture, muddy and flickering, of warm seas and green light, of trilobites and worms and moss. Dinosaurs have not been invented, but the devil is everywhere.

We are the apparatus. We are the apex. We are first.

I cannot reply. I'm trying to decide if apex means precisely what it intimates and if it's something I want to be (*of course you do, you ninny!*). Again, images coalesce from the ether, like bursts of speech through shortwave static. The future unravels in an arc of projectile vomit from the jaws of Saturn: an approaching tsunami of blood and peeled flesh and more blood. A thousand feet tall, rolling at a thousand miles per hour. The first of many such waves. Wave after wave of carnage, and me in gigantic repose atop a heap of bones. My friends and foes, beneath me at last!

Ferris is fucking Monroe. We don't have to take that kind of bullshit. We should fix their wagons. We are the apparatus. We are the way.

That sounds reasonable. A man should attend his priorities. Family comes first.

I loved monster movies as a kid. Don't all boys love monster movies?

Dawn of the Dead. Evil Dead. Re-Animator. From Beyond. The Fly. The Thing. Right on. I dug it, especially zombie flicks. The shambling undead

did it for me.

Had my first hot and heavy teen make out session with Julie Vellum during a screening of *Night of the Living Dead* at her dad's split level house. I'd seen the movie plenty of times, but this was super-fucking hot cheerleader Julie Vellum; shag rugs, a leather couch, and her pop's brand new RCA television. That's why Mr. V tolerated me sniffing around his princess that lost summer of my junior year in high school—like me, he was a devout fan of classic fright features. Val Lewton and George Romero were unto gods in Mr. V's estimation. Death gods, I thought, but kept such smart-ass observations to myself by concentrating upon the sky-high hemline of his daughter's skirt. I didn't even find out until much later that Mr. V was dying of cancer. The Vellums kept it hush-hush until he finally got sick enough for hospice care.

The three of us camped on that giant couch. Me on one end, Julie on the other, her dad, larger than life, occupying the middle. We kids sipped bottles of Coke while Mr. V blasted his way through a fifth of Maker's Mark and talked over all the good parts. Soon, he slurred and blessedly lengthy gaps interrupted his monologue. He rose and staggered toward the kitchen in quest of more booze. There followed a series of thuds and then a crash that shook the living room.

I jumped a little and then froze, unsure about the etiquette of rushing to the aid of collapsed drunk who happens to be the father of the chick you're trying to score with. Do you say something or do you pretend you didn't hear a damned thing?

She came to my rescue.

"Oh, don't worry. That's him passing out. He does it all the time." Julie gave me a cat-eyed look. Two seconds later we met in the middle. She kissed me as my hands went roaming places they had no business, and then she jacked me off like she'd done it before.

I made it with Julie a half dozen times before school started again. Once the frost set in, she dropped me like a bad habit. Despite my momentary anguish, it was for the best. White trash, both of us. She had a little money, and that made all the difference. She also carried a torch for the quarterback on our football team. Beating his ass wouldn't have been a problem; I was

really good at inflicting pain by then. Size and meanness were on my side, although I made certain to keep the latter under wraps. My gambit was to smile and keep my mouth shut whenever possible. Didn't matter. Most everyone was piss-scared of me for reasons they couldn't express. The assholes voted me most likely to wind up in prison or in an early grave.

That's why I suppressed my rage, and why I let JV saunter into the sunset with her trophy jock. The things I envisioned doing in the name of love would've landed me in Goose Bay Penitentiary or a nuthouse. Instead, I slunk into the garden and ate worms and went quietly mad exactly as the moldy poets from parchment and quill days had done.

Nightmares afflicted me with a ferocity I hadn't experienced since childhood. Who knows what caused them. Stress? Hormones? Whatever the case, these were the stuff of legends. Imagine being trapped inside a waxworks dedicated to atrocities, and all the doors sealed. Horrors from pre-adolescence reinvented themselves into subtler, more sophisticated iterations freighted with guilt and shame. My nightmares had *matured* and they took a cat o' nine tails to my psyche. I was visited every night for several months.

The phenomenon leaked into waking life. I became gaunt, pallid, and terser than ever. I forced myself to wear a shit-eating grin while secretly worrying that I'd gone around the bend. I began to hallucinate. At school I caught glimpses of my classmates and teachers wearing death masks. Some were pale and serene, others contorted and agonized, and still others dripping blood, or caved in, or sheared away entirely to expose the cavern of the mind.

The unexpected result of this being that I got better with my own mask, more scrupulous about tightening the bolts. Even so, it's a miracle I kept a straight face while gazing at exposed brains or punctured eyeballs. I got good at nodding and smiling.

A particular incident almost undid me anyhow. One morning during passing period Julie's locker door was open and for some reason—don't know what the hell I was thinking—I eased on over to chat her up. Second week of school, me being lonely and horny, not in my right mind—which covers any teenage boy—but me moreso. The door swung shut and there

she stood, enfolded in the jock's arms, playing tonsil hockey. The bell broke up their tryst and they sauntered away, not acknowledging my presence as I stared after them.

I didn't feel anything, the exact same way I didn't feel anything the time Dad got drunk and slugged me in the jaw and laid me on my ass. The same lights flickered in the dark regions of my mind, the same roar of distant wind rose in my ears. The locker and a section of the concrete floor dissolved as if by acid. A hole bored into the earth and I had an erection that nearly split my pants. No nose bleed this time around. I was afraid, though. Terrified enough that I got away and got drunk on Dad's stock of Old Crow, damn the consequences were he to discover the theft, and I made myself forget. But the nightmares. Jesus. Jesus.

Dogged, simple-minded stubbornness got me though the autumn more or less intact, and largely unscarred.

What *scarred* me was getting ejected face-first through the windshield of Dad's '82 Chevy that winter. He hit a patch of ice and left the road doing around sixty-five and smacked a berm of snow packed tight as concrete by the state road graders. Never a compulsive buckler of seatbelts, I flew over the berm and burrowed into the virgin snow beyond. Dad burned up with the Chevy. Odd, how of all the folks that were rendered a horror show in my visions, I hadn't seen his death mask until I glimpsed him through the flames and melting glass.

No more nightmares for a long, long time after that incident. No dreams of any kind. Sleep became a chrysalis.

Apparently, a side effect of apex prowess is peckishness. The Glenn Highway spreads before me, a glistening buffet table strung with cozy sodium lights for mood.

Whatever manipulates me is not traveling of its own volition so much as being pulled as a steel filing by the mother of all magnets. The delays and digressions are but zigzag deviations of a neutron star as it's dragged into a black hole.

In any event, I zig through a rest stop near Eagle River and am compelled to annihilate the dozen or so inhabitants. Well, I *say* compelled—it's not as if I require much arm-twisting.

I wrench doors from semi-trucks and peel the roofs off compact cars. I am a beast cracking oyster shells. My need is overwhelming; my appetite is profound. I lick eyes from sockets, then the brains, the guts, the cracked-from-the-bone marrow, and even swallow a few bones whole. I expand and contract, I divide and reform. I squirm and slash. I am a pit that is everywhere. Light bends around me, or it is consumed.

A handful of survivors flee into the dour Plexiglas and cement octagon with a stylized eagle blazoned on the sloped roof. My reflection warps against the glass, or perhaps warps the glass itself. A cockscomb of jagged flint erupts from the sundered dome of my cranium. Spurs of razor-tipped basalt extrude from my wrists, elbows, and knees. Even as I take it in, its ghastly splendor, my physiognomy alters and is transfigured into something far worse, something that overwhelms my capacity to articulate its awfulness.

I am resplendently dire. I am a figure of awe. I am a horror.

They barricade the entrance with soda machines and that delays me for a few seconds once I finish outside. I find them cowering and gibbering prayers under Formica tables and in bathroom stalls. Somebody stabs me with a hunting knife, somebody else plugs me with a small caliber handgun. Six or seven teeny popgun flashes in the dark among the roaring and screaming. It hardly matters.

Toward the end, I flop, maw agape, on the concrete floor at the end of the demolished gallery and let that sweet hot stream of blood and viscera roll down my gullet. Overhead, the lights flicker crazily and shadows rip themselves apart. When it's finished, I shamble forth from the despoiled building. Pasted in gore and excrement, crowned by a garland of intestines, I strike a Jesus Christ pose in the center of the highway.

Traffic routes around me, makes me consider the legend of the stampeding buffalo herd breaking around a man if he remains motionless and tall in his boots. The sun arcs across the sky four times, and so swiftly it sheds tracers of flame. A green-gold ball of bubbling gas, a bacterium in division. The amoeba sun segments in rhythm with my own squamous brain cells. The

sun strobes and vanishes. The sliver of moon swings down and sinks into my breast, cold as a fang of ice. That which nests within my DNA blooms and reticulates as it rewrites parameters of operation.

The city awaits. I project myself forward along a corridor of alternating light and darkness, contract through a crimson doorway, and flow into a dance hall. My need to gorge is satiated and replaced by an urge I don't recognize. A wormhole opens behind my left eye. The void shivers and yearns; it lusts for sensation. Music dies as the DJ apprehends me with his bemused gaze. Then the dancing. All heads turn toward my dreadful countenance.

What happens at the Gold Digger Saloon. I cannot speak of it. The ecstasy is the sun going nova in my brain. Nova, then collapsing inward, a snow crystal flaking, disintegrating, and then nothing left except a point of darkness, the wormy head of a black strand that bores its way to the core of everything.

We aren't rich. The pool house is our compromise—as long as Ferris didn't push for a mother-in-law cottage, I'd see she had herself a full length heated pool to do laps. Ferris was on the swim team in high school and college and she's tried valiantly to maintain her form. The YMCA is a no go. Too many sluggish old people in the lane, too many screaming kids, too many creepy dudes in the bleachers. Thus, the pool house. A gesture of defiance in the face of brutal Alaska winters.

I enter through the skylight. A long dead star field turns and burns over my shoulder.

Ferris lies naked and icy pale against the dappled green water. Her eyes are closed. Occasionally her arms and legs scissor languidly. Beneath her is her seal shadow and the white tile that slopes away into haziness. Vapors shift across her body and carry its scent to me, sharp and clean amid the faint tang of chlorine. She daydreams on the cusp of sleep and I taste the procession of phantoms that illuminate her inner landscape. Mine is not among them.

I descend like a great spider on its wire, then stop and hang in place. This thing that has hijacked and reconstituted my body, reduced my consciousness and placed it in a bell jar, is drawn to her. More specifically, that which I have become is drawn to something *within* her. I don't comprehend the intricacies. I can only bear mute witness to the spectacle as it unfolds.

A black spot stains the bottom of the pool. The spot spreads across the white bed, a ring of darkness widening as pieces of tile crumble into the depths. It is a pit, slackening directly below my lovely, frigid wife. My betrayer wife, my arm extending, my claw, hollow as a siphon, its shadow upon her betrayer's face, and the abyssal trench an iris beneath. Wife, come along to Kingdom Come, come to the underworld.

Her eyes snap open.

"I didn't fuck him," she says. "I fantasized about it, plenty."

Monroe is absent from the scene, and that's a shame. Every pore in me longs to drink his blood, to liquefy him, fry him, to have his heart in my fist. To ram his heart down her throat.

"I didn't fuck him. Elmer, I didn't. I should've."

Her blood. His blood. Their atoms.

I open my mouth (maw) to accuse, to excoriate, and the dead song of the dead stars worms out. She doesn't blink, she repeats that she hasn't fucked him, hasn't fucked him. She projects her innocence in an electromagnetic cone meant to kill. She is entirely too composed, this fragile sack of skin and water.

She says, "Are you here to hurt me, Elmer?" Her smile is pitiless, it cuts. "The time you came home drunk and forced me? There's a word for you, hon. Don't you remember what you've done?"

I don't remember. I seethe.

Difficult to concentrate through the interference of her thoughts that explain via pointillism how Monroe opportunistically slaughtered me and then so much like the narrator of the "Tell-Tale Heart" had succumbed to guilt and paranoia and eventually fled the country. The FBI hunts him in connection with my disappearance. He could be anywhere. She suspects

Mexico. Monroe always had a romanticized notion about Mexico and what he could do there, a super gringo lover man.

The little shit swallowed her teary stories of my cruelty and violence. He'd done me in as an act of vengeance. An act that only earned Ferris's contempt. She is utterly my creature and let no man cast asunder what all the powers above and below had seen fit to forge.

I convulse with a complicated longing and snatch for her. She's too quick. She rolls, sleek and white, and flashes downward amid a cloud of bubbles into the pit. Fool that I am, I follow.

We meet in darkness, each illuminated by a weak spotlight that dims and brightens with our breathing. I sense immense coldness and space pressing against the bubble where we reside. I am whole. My cloven skull and rotting flesh are restored. My mind is papered over with gold star stickers and crepe.

She points an automatic pistol at me. I understand that it's a present from her would-be lover. The barrel aligns with my eye. I have traveled through the barrel and been deposited in this limbo.

"I warned him. Told him he'd never succeed. If I couldn't kill you, then there was no hope for him." She laughs and shakes the wet hair from her eyes. "Arsenic in your coffee every day for three months. Nothing. For God's sake, I frosted your birthday cake with rat poison."

Now that she mentions it, now that her thoughts bleed into mine, I recall the bitter coffee, the odd aftertaste of the icing on my last cake. A skull and crossbones has hung over our marriage for years. Yet, I remain. What does it mean?

"I hurt you, but I couldn't kill you. Monroe couldn't. Nobody can. You died in childhood. Maybe you were never born. Maybe the parasite that fruits your corpse is the only true part of you that existed."

Am I merely a figment? If so, I am the most rapacious, carnivorous, and vengeful figment she will have the misfortune to encounter. I strike aside the gun and reach for her. A black halo of light manifests around Ferris. Her

arms spread wide and she becomes the very figure of a dread and terrible insect queen. The enormity of her eclipses my own.

She clutches me and the sting slides in. “It was always here, love. In all of us, always.”

It’s apparent that I’ve miscalculated again.

Reality has bent and bent. I look past the nimbus of black flame into her cold eyes. Reality goes right ahead and comes apart.

Darkness rolls back to daylight. It’s spring and balmy. The breeze is redolent with sweet green sap and the bloom of roses. Guests and children of the guests clutter a lawn that’s too bright and too green to be real. “Death to Everyone” by good old Will Oldham crackles over the speakers. I’m stuffed into a poorly fitted tux. At my side, Ferris shines as radiantly white as the Queen of Winter.

I have seen this, relived this, in a thousand-thousand nightmares.

My hand overlaps hers as we saw the blade into that multi-tiered cake. She opens her mouth and bites through the icing, the bunting, and my brittle soul. I shudder and kiss her. It feels no different than kissing ice bobbed up from the bottom of an arctic lake. She inhales my heat and my vitality before I can inhale hers. She’s always been stronger, in the only way that counts. She always will be stronger.

Oldham’s voice fades and the guests stare at us in hushed expectation.

Nearby, a little girl in a black funeral dress begins to sing the “Hearse Song” to the boy she’s tormenting with malice or affection, take your pick:

They put you in a big black box
And cover you up with dirt and rocks.
All goes well for about a week,
Then your coffin begins to leak.
The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out,
The worms play pinochle in your snout,
They eat your eyes, they eat your nose,
They eat the jelly between your toes.

This time around, I do what I should've in the first place all those lost years ago. Instead of cutting a piece for the first guest in line, I grip the knife and slice my throat. Blood fans the cake and Ferris's white dress. She throws back her head and laughs. I sink to my knees in the thirsty grass. The sun pales and contracts to a black ring. Red shadows pour through the trees, drench the lawn, and reduce the paralyzed spectators to negatives. I try to speak. Worms crawl out.

Ferris's parents *loved* me. I first met them during Thanksgiving when she and I stayed over at the family casa—Ferris slept in her old room with the Prince poster and a mountain of heart-shaped pillows and teddy bears while I bunked in the basement on a leather sofa between her old man's pool table and a gun safe.

There was a tense moment when she removed her shades and revealed the Lichtenburg flower of a purple knot under her eye. Ferris was so very smooth. She spun a story about getting kicked in the face during swim practice, and her family bought it. She wasn't speaking to *me* except as required, probably hadn't even decided whether to stay with me or toss her engagement ring into the trash.

Hell of it was, at that early stage in our romance I didn't care much either way.

Turkey, gravy, pumpkin pie, and afterward, a quart of Jim Beam passed around a circle of a half-dozen of Ferris's menfolk. Salt of the earth bumpkins who raised coon dogs and revved the engines on four-wheelers at the gravel pit and picked through piles at the dump for fun.

You like John Wayne? one truck-driving uncle wanted to know. *Shore as hail, I love the Duke!* And with that, I was in like Flynn. My lumberjack beard, plaid coat, and knowledge of professional football didn't go amiss, either.

Her dad welcomed me to the family with teary eyes and a bear hug. I wasn't "nothin' like them pussies she usually brings home from college." How right my future in-law hillbillies were! Not three days before that Clampett-style feast I'd beaten a UAA fraternity brother within an inch of

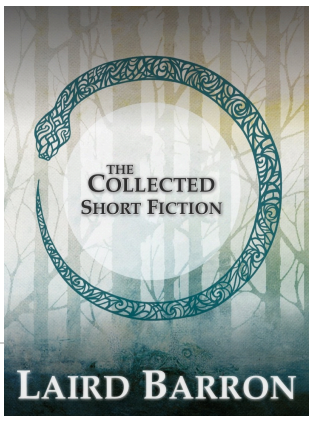
his life for giving me the stink eye as I staggered home from the Gold Digger Saloon. I made the letter-sweater-wearing jock try to eat a parking meter. The whole time Ferris's family exchanged jocular crudities at the supper table, my hand was in my pocket, caressing the frat boy's braces, with a few teeth still stuck in them, like a God-fearing Catholic fondling his rosary. It was the only thing that kept me from stabbing one of those bozos with a steak knife.

I gave the lot of those silly, inbred bastards my best aw-shucks grin, and daydreamed about how lovely and charred their slack-jawed skulls would shine from the cinders of a three a.m. house fire.

Aided by booze and a vivid imagination, I survived dinner and into the following day. Driving home, the stars were blacked. Snow fell like a sonofabitch. Every now and again the tires slipped against ice and the truck shook. Dad's ghost muttered in my ear. My heart knocked and I forgot to blink for at least forty miles. The high-beams carved a tunnel into the blizzard. Patsy Cline came on the radio out of Anchorage. Patsy sang "Crazy" and that was our song, all right.

Ferris reached across the gulf from the passenger side and held my hand. Her fingers pressed cold and tight over mine. In the rearview there was nothing but darkness, snowflakes endlessly collapsing in our wake, and a black slick of road painted red in the taillights' glow.

Screaming Elk, MT



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One night, a trucker dropped me at a tavern in Screaming Elk, MT, population 333. A bunch of locals had gathered to shoot pool and drown their sorrows in tap beer. CNN aired an hour-long feature on survivors of violent crime. The Jessica Mace segment popped around halfway through and I told the bartender to switch it pronto. A sodbuster on the next stool took exception, started to bark his offense, then he did a double take at the file photo of me larger than life onscreen and things went from bad to ugly.

"You're that broad! Yeah, yeah, you're her!" Shitkicker had crossed over to the dark side of drunk. "Nice rack," he went on in a confidential tone. "I wouldn't pay a nickel for anything above the tits, though."

I threw a glass of whiskey in his face, as a lady does when her appearance is insulted by an oaf. No biggie—I'd been nursing the cheap stuff. A couple of his comrades at the bar laughed. He recovered fast—animals are like that—made a fist, and cocked it behind his left ear. I puckered my lips. Don't suppose that I enjoy getting punched in the face. It's simply that I can make it work for me if it comes to that.

Despite my gravelly voice and rough edges, I know how to play the femme fatale. I can also hold my booze. It's a devastating combo. My brothers Elwood and Bronson were the brawlers, the steamrollers. Elwood has gone to his reward and Bronson crashes cars for a living. Me? Let's just say I prefer to rely upon a combination of native cunning and feminine wiles to accomplish my goals. Flames and explosions are strictly measures of last resort.

I'll put my life in mortal danger for a pile of cash. No shock there, anybody would. Goes deeper, though. I'll also venture into hazard to satisfy my

curiosity, and that's more problematic. The compulsion seems to be growing stronger. Violence, at least the threat of violence, is a rush. I'm addicted to the ramifications and the complications.

As the CNN story so luridly explained, I did for that serial killer up in Alaska, the Eagle Talon Ripper, and nothing has been the same. It's as if the stars and the sky don't align correctly, as if the universe is off its axis by a degree or two. Since pulling that trigger I haven't figured out exactly what to do with myself. I wander the earth. It would be romantic to say I'm righting wrongs or seeking my destiny. Feels more like I'm putting my shoe into one fresh pile after another.

A good friend who worked in the people-removing business for the Mafia once told me there aren't coincidences or accidents, reality doesn't work that way. Since the first inert, superdense particle detonated and spewed forth all that gas and dust and radiation, everything has been on an unerring collision vector with its ultimate mate, and every bit of the flotsam and jetsam is cascading toward the galactic Niagara Falls into oblivion.

The dude possessed a more inquisitive nature than one might expect from an enforcer by trade. He said, *Jessica, you're a dancing star being dragged toward the black hole at the ragged edges of all we know. Drawn with irresistible force, you'll level anything in your path, or drag it to hell in your wake.*

Load of horseshit, am I right? Sloppy, I-love-you-man drivel. Yet his words come back to me as I travel east, ever east. I'm starting to believe him. I'm a dancing star and my self-determination is a façade.

Cut to the drunken asshole in the bar rearing back to knock me into next Tuesday. Not so fast, Tex, said the universe.

A rugged, burly fellow in a safari shirt and work pants stepped in and introduced himself with a left hook to the sodbuster's jaw. Put the cowboy to sleep with one blow. I hadn't needed a white knight. I'd palmed a steak knife and knew exactly where to stick it if necessary. But, I must admit, the crunch of the cowpoke's jawbone and the fast-spreading blood on the scuffed floorboards thrilled me a little. A lot.

Mr. White Knight rubbed his hand. All those nicks and notches on his knuckles, like rocks that had been smacked together a thousand times.

“I’m Beasley. What are you drinking?”

“Ah, the beginning of another beautiful friendship.”

Mist flooded across the marsh and erased the country road. Rounding a bend, we were transported from present-day Montana to Scottish moors circa 1840s, or a Universal Studios sound lot with Bela Lugosi poised to sweep aside his cape along with our feeble protestations.

“Can’t-find-your-own-ass-with-both-hands-and-a-flashlight weather,” I said to cut the tension.

Beasley stepped on the pedal. His face by dashboard light put me in mind of Race Bannon and Doc Savage. The unbuttoned safari shirt contributed nicely. Ten, maybe fifteen years my senior, but some juice left in him; I loved that too. A crucifix dangled from the rearview mirror, also sprigs of dried flowers. More dried flowers peeked from the ashtray. I wondered if these details meant anything; made a note.

We were rocking and rolling like a motherfucker now. That rickety farm truck’s tires cried mercy. But when the moon hove nine-tenths full and full of blood over the black rim of night and screamed white-hot silver through the boiling clouds, everything stood still.

“The Gallows Brothers Carnival, huh?” I said after I caught my breath. I would have said anything to break the spell. “I heard that name somewhere. Want to say a news story. Which means somebody got maimed or murdered. Wouldn’t be news otherwise.”

He grunted and hit me with a sidelong glance.

“So, uh, you know how to shoot a gun?” Maybe he meant the rifle rattling in the window rack behind our heads. A light-gauge shotgun, nothing fabulous. “And would you say you’re fast on your feet? On a scale from a chick in high heels to Carl Lewis sprinting from a lion.”

“I hate it when dudes ask me that. The line of inquiry seldom leads anywhere pleasant.”

“You dames have all had bad experiences.”

I laughed, low and nasty.

“Yeah, it’s weird. Can’t figure what the common denominator might be.”

He shut his mouth for a while, smarting. Guy like him, pain didn't last long. A whack upside the head with a two-by-four was positive attention.

My thoughts went to a previous fling with another brutish loner type: a coyote hunter in eastern Washington. I hoped my luck was better this go-around. I hoped Beasley's luck was better too.

"You're not really a carnival roadie," I said a few miles later. "You lack that particular something or other."

"Well, I wouldn't get on any of the rides."

The Gallows Brothers Carnival had set up shop in a pasture a few miles outside of town. Unfortunately, I had missed the last show. The great machinery lay cold and silent and would soon be dismantled. Beasley lived in a modular at the end of a concourse of shuttered stalls, Tilt-a-Whirls, and tents. All very Beaver Cleaver 1950s. The night breeze swirled sawdust and the burned powder of exploded firecrackers.

A wolf howled from the north where the forest began.

Then we were inside Beasley's shack, barring the door behind us. Down, down into the darkness we dove, to the bottom of a blue hole at the bottom of the earth. The wolf howled again. Its pack answered and the ponderosa pines closed ranks, as Beasley's Herculean arms closed me in.

A hazy nightlight fumed at the foot of the bunk. Beasley, with a physique straight from a picture book of Norse gods, could've wrestled bears, looked as if he'd done so on occasion. Once Beasley and I got going he held back for fear of breaking me, the fool. I wanted to tell him it was only really good once it started to hurt, but I'd gone past the vanishing point and dissolved into another, primal self, the one that doesn't speak English.

He performed as his swagger advertised, or close enough. Afterward, he lay slick and aglow, perfectly scarred. I asked him if he did any acting, because he radiated mucho charisma. He only smiled boyishly and took a swig from the bottle, took it in like water. I suspected his fate would be to die horribly of cirrhosis, or under the claws of a beast, and young, or to turn fifty and appear as if he'd gone face first into a wall, haggard as a kerosene-swilling bum. Probably the dying-young deal: I kept seeing a bleached skull when I caught him in my peripheral vision.

“Gimme some sweet, sweet nothings,” I said to keep him from nodding off and leaving me alone with my two a.m. thoughts, and alone with the howls in the wood.

“Look, doll, I’m a man of action. Sweet talk ain’t my bailiwick.”

“Your wick isn’t going into my bailey again if you don’t humor me.”

“As you say.” He cleared his throat. “How can you be sure you’re here?”

“What, think you were humping your pillow?”

“Sorry, Jess, you started this. Maybe all of it is a projection. Or a computer program. You’re a sexy algorithm looping for eternity.”

We shared a cigarette. Not my brand.

“Kinda smart for a dumb guy,” I said. What I knew of Beasley’s past derived from a few hours over pints—ex-army, ex-footballer, a hunter, a bodyguard, expert driver. Man-at-arms slash valet and satisfied with the role. College had served as a central hub for womanizing, boozing, and playing ball.

“No offense taken, or anything.” He even made petulance sound manly.

“Don’t get riled, handsome. Playing dumb is your protective coloration. It’s how you fool the predators. *Most* of us are fooled.”

“My protective coloration is a surly disposition and a buffalo gun that’d blast a hole through a concrete bunker.”

“Neither of those require smarts.” I squinted at a movie poster of Robby the Robot carrying unconscious Anne Francis against a backdrop of shooting stars, and another of Lon Chaney Jr. bursting the buttons of his natty white shirt as a devil moon blared through evergreen branches.

“Wait a second. Is that wolfsbane in the pot?”

“Jessica… you’re not a hologram, you’re a dream.” He kneaded my breast. “It had to be the right woman, but I hoped it would be a flake, a bumpkin. I was afraid you’d come here. Ever since I dreamt of you there’s been a dark spot floating in my mind. A mote.”

“Make sense, man!”

“Yeah, it’s wolfsbane.” He rolled away from me, the oldest trick in the book.

I woke to a little girl screaming her heart out, out in the darkness. Beasley gently clamped his hand over my mouth, his other arm wrapped around my waist. I wasn't going anywhere unless I took extreme measures. Not so much of a turn-on in this context.

"It's all right." He spoke so softly, I almost didn't catch it. "They say an elk screams like a child. Go back to sleep."

A long time and a lot of silence passed before he let me go.

Oatmeal and kiwis for breakfast in the commissary. Beasley introduced me around to the early risers. *Hey, everybody, this is Jessica Mace. She's wandering the earth. Make her feel at home.* Damned if I didn't despite their clannishness. Free food is free food.

Strongman (actually a *strongwoman*, after a double take), bearded lady, wolf girl, Poindexter the Geek, the knife thrower, Ephandra the Contortionist, and Perkins and Luther—head carpenter and electrician respectively. The Gallows brothers, Benson and Robert, weren't on hand. The proprietors had departed on a hush-hush mission, or so Beasley intimated when I asked to meet the gents.

Beasley's request notwithstanding, I received the hairy eyeball from the company. Nobody said two words to me except for Earl, the Illustrated Man. Earl repeatedly inquired where oh where on my delectable body I might be inked. Answer: nowhere, jerk. I kind of hoped Beasley would bust his jaw too, but it didn't happen. Several children lurked on the periphery. The oldest, an adolescent girl; the youngest, a grubby boy maybe a year or two out of diapers. They gawped at me from a safe distance, until their minder, a matronly lass named Rocky, swept them away with brisk efficiency.

After breakfast, Beasley escorted me on a tour of the environs. I tasted snow. A lot of the stuff covered the mountain peaks.

"This doesn't jibe," I said. "Are you hiding from the law, or what?"

We'd moseyed a distance from the encampment. He wore a battered Australian drover's hat, light jacket, work pants, and lace-up boots. He also

carried a big-ass hunting rifle slung over his shoulder. Double barrels, very serious.

“Whatever happens, don’t get scared.”

“Scared of what? And, too late.”

“Of nothing. I’m not on the lam, by the way. Vacation.” He knelt and traced flattened grass with his entire hand. We were surrounded by an ocean of it, tall and white, dying.

“How everybody spoke to you, you’ve been here a while.”

“Ten months next week.”

“Ten months! Sounds more and more like you’re on work release.”

He laughed. Nice white teeth. Considering the battered condition of his face, it was a small miracle he’d kept most of them.

“I live back east. My regular employers are having a disagreement.”

“Dare I ask what they do?”

“Big brains. Quantum physics, exobiology, anthropology. They’re famous, infamous, one of those things. A pair of mad scientist types. They’d love to build a time machine or a doomsday device for the kicks.”

“Sounds like wacky fun. I could use a spin in a time machine, for sure.”

“Backward or forward?”

I shrugged, bored.

“Sorry your bosses are trying to kill each other. Family feuds are the worst.”

“It’s all the shooting that made me nervous.” He turned away and scanned the ground again.

“What’s the argument about?”

“The ethics of temporal collocation of sapient organisms.”

“No shit?”

“I shit you not. Mainly, they’re at each other’s throats about a dog.”

“Oh, I get that. *I’d* kill over a good dog.”

“Hmm. This one sure as hell is. Or it will be, after they build it.”

“Build it? Are we talking about a robot?”

“A cyborg. It—he—is a war machine. Weapons contractor is financing the project. My bosses are making history. Rex has a positronic brain. First of its kind, and Toshi and Howard are fighting over the ethics. Look, stick around a few days, we’ll fly to the compound, I’ll show you. Easier that way.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Man, I wish Rex was online. We’d make short work of…” He cleared his throat and stood. “Be seven or eight years before the prototype is even in alpha phase. Gonna have to do this the old-fashioned way.”

“Do what the old-fashioned way? Aren’t you on vacation?”

“So to speak. Personal business. I traveled with this carnival as a kid. Ran away from a bad scene at home. The Gallowses took me in, gave me a job, made sure I got an education. They’re my uncles and they’re in trouble.”

“A debt of honor. How sweet.” Sweet like rat poison. Daddy the Marine had taught us kids a whole lot about honor. Honor had put him and my eldest brother into early graves. Can’t say I have much use for the sentiment.

“I didn’t pick you out of that bar just because you’re a looker,” Beasley said. “You’re something special.”

“Huh, that’s some heavy duty charm you’re laying down.”

“Yeah, it’s exhausting. I’ll stop.”

“Since you’ve already had your way, I’m steeling myself for the worst.”

“The Gallows Carnival is cursed. I’ve come to put things in order.”

“Wait, what? A curse?”

“Right.”

“Like voodoo, desecrated-Indian-burial-grounds kind of curse?”

He pointed to a splotch of maroon on the grass.

“Stay tuned.”

I decided to give Twenty Questions a break. I stuffed my hands into my pockets and tagged along as he inspected a rusty overgrown fence. Soon, he

found a break in the wire. A black funnel bored through a copse of pine trees, juniper, and nettles. The hole had obviously been formed by the crush of a massive body wallowing its way through the tangle.

Then the breeze shifted and the reek of putrefying flesh almost knocked me down. Beasley handed me his hat and unlimbered his rifle. He carried a flashlight in his left hand. Its beam didn't cut very far into the darkness.

Motioning for me to stay put, he crouched and moved into the burrow.

"Bad idea, Beasley. Bad, very bad." Over the stench of death, I whiffed something else, something born of musk, dank fur, sweat, and piss. This was the lair of a ravenous beast, a creature of fang and lust. The combination of scents, the crimson aura of the den, made me dizzy, made my nipples hard and my thighs weak. I slapped myself across the mouth and that shocked me out of my little swoon.

Maybe slightly too effective. Every birdcall, every snapped twig caused me to twitch. The shadows in the trees became sinister. I gave serious thought to leaving Beasley there, strolling back to camp. I'd have coffee with a nip of bourbon and wait to see if he ever returned.

"Jess." His voice floated from the tunnel, muffled and strange. "Dial 911. Ask for Sheriff Holcomb. Tell him to come right away."

I made the call and identified myself. The dispatcher asked the usual questions and said a squad car would be on site shortly. Beasley crawled from the den, shirt torn and stems in his hair. He tossed a man's severed head on the ground. Dead two or three days at most. The left eye was still intact. Blue as milk. Hours later, I still saw my shadow reflected in it, the beetles and the flies crawling around, unsure where to start.

"Five or six bodies in there," Beasley said in a hoarse voice. He lighted a cigarette. Reached for his hip flask of whiskey, glanced at the sun, and reconsidered. Then reconsidered again and down the goddamned hatch. "Gonna have to reassemble the pieces to know for sure. Lotta pieces."

"Cops are on the way."

I'm not sure if I said it to reassure myself or to warn him that there'd be no more axe murdering on my watch. I ninety-nine percent dismissed the possibility of his involvement in a massacre. My instincts are hellishly

sharp when it comes to detecting the evil that lurks in the hearts of men. Beasley had issues. Cold-blooded murder wasn't one.

The sun inched across the sky. Beasley checked his watch every couple of minutes.

"Did the carnival lose a tiger?" I said. "Or a lion? The neck wound is… chunky. That's how a big cat might savage its prey." As if I knew jack shit about big cats or mauled corpses. My mouth pops into gear when I'm nervous.

"The Gallowses own three panthers. All accounted for. This ain't a wild animal attack. This is a whole other thing."

I couldn't stop staring at the head, its mouth agape, teeth and tongue clotted in gore. I ran my thumb along the scar on my throat, felt a sympathetic pang, and relived the searing slash of the blade as it sawed on through.

"Here's the sheriff," Beasley said. He looked me in the eye, hard. "Be careful."

"We're hunting rabbits?" I always try to be brave.

"Don't get cute with him. He's not your friend. Take my word."

I decided to heed his warning. A bad black vibe pushed forward thick as the dust from the cop cars tearing along the road.

Two Lewis and Clark County police cruisers nosed into the field. Several cops in midnight blue suits and white Stetson hats trudged the rest of the way to us. They patted the guns on their hips. One had a German shepherd on a leash. Poor dog wanted fuck-all to do with the murder scene. He pissed himself and cowered between the legs of his mortified handler, a lantern-jawed gal in mirrored shades.

Beasley shook hands with the sheriff. Two dogs deciding whether to sniff asses or just get to tearing each other apart.

Blond bearded and heavy through shoulders and hips, Sheriff Von Holcomb seemed at least a decade underseasoned for the post. On the other hand, one glance at the austere panorama and I concluded that finding a taker for the position might mean the electorate couldn't afford to be too picky.

"Huh, well fuck a duck." Sheriff Holcomb toed the severed head. He covered his mouth with a bright red handkerchief. His deputies took tape

measurements and snapped photographs of the crime scene. The unluckiest of them all, a goober with a painfully large Adam's apple, got sent into the burrow with a Maglite and a camera.

"Any idea who we're lookin' at here?"

"Alfred Fenwood." Beasley passed the sheriff a bloodied driver's license. "Don't know him. Drag the bars, you'll find Al likes cheap beer and long walks along the highway after dark."

"We got missing-person reports galore over the past three weeks. Hikers, ranch hands, some folks snatched out of parking lots. Lots of wild animal calls, too. Ripped-to-hell pets, the usual sort of crap." The sheriff glanced at me slyly, propped his boot on the head like a kid resting on a soccer ball, and slipped off his wedding band and made it disappear.

"Oh, man, are you kidding?" I stepped back and gripped the Ka-Bar under my coat. Come to it, I'd stab a hillbilly psycho, badge or not. My shiny new policy.

"You snuffed the Eagle Talon Ripper," he said.

"No surprise you're the lead detective in Timbuktu," I said. A mistake because his smirk suggested he mistook contempt for flirtation.

"See my girl Friday with the dog?"

"Hard to miss."

"Know why she wears them mirror shades? My mama was a gorgon. Deputy Cooper thinks some of the evil runs in my blood. She's afraid to look me in the eye." He grinned when I didn't answer. Ogled my scars. "Wow. It's true, you Alaska broads are tough as leather. Bastard really did slice your throat from ear to ear. Then you rose from the dead and sent him to hell. Amazing. Marcy at Dispatch ran your name. It's flagged, big time. I suppose we're gonna have to keep tabs on you while you're visiting our fair state. Mm-mm-mm.

"How you survive something like that, eh? Don't seem possible. Don't seem possible, 't all. That freak cut you anywhere else?" He actually reached for my collar and I tensed, ready to shorten his fingers by a knuckle or two.

"Von," Beasley said, saving the day. "We've got a situation. Best to focus."

“Plainly.” Sheriff Holcomb grudgingly lowered his hand. “The Gallowses think Injun ground gonna do the trick when nothing else ever has?”

“This ground represents a full circle. Fifty years, Von.”

“Ain’t sacred. Ain’t holy. It’s elk shit and dirt.”

“Red moon last night.”

“I ain’t blind.”

“We proceed with the plan. Gallowses’ orders.”

“Ha! Oh, as if I jump when they yell froggy.”

“Today you do.”

Sheriff Holcomb watched the shepherd twist himself into a pretzel and snap at his deputy K-9 partner. The cop in mirror shades swore and danced to avoid losing a hunk of her flesh.

“Things fallin’ to pieces around here,” the sheriff said.

“And you gotta keep a lid on this mess,” Beasley said. “Unless you want the feds on it like flies.”

“Be serious, amigo. The feds won’t figure into this.”

“Fifty years is a high-water mark. I assume nothing. Hell could be waiting in the wings.”

“And her?” The sheriff jerked his thumb at me. “Where she fit into your plan?”

“She’s our secret weapon.”

“You mean bait.”

“Same thing.”

“Bait?” I said.

“Secret weapon,” Beasley said.

“The sight of blood doesn’t faze you,” Beasley said after he got me back to the camp. We sat at a bench while two bearded guys in coveralls loaded boxes onto a trailer.

“Are you kidding? It fazes the shit outta me. Just that I see more than my fair share. I’m building a tolerance, one snakebite at a time.” I took a slug from Beasley’s flask. Too early in the day, even by my bohemian standards, but I’d earned it. “Let us recap. There’s a pile of human bodies in yonder animal den. You knew they’d be there. Or, like me, you’re super-duper unflappable.”

“Ain’t a den. It’s a trophy room. We’re not dealing with an animal. Not in the strictest sense of the term. I’m not very cool, either. Scared spitless, honestly.”

“Uh-huh. These murders are revenge oriented, sex fantasies, rituals, what? You said something to your sheriff pal about fifty years…”

“Revenge ritual. The Gallows curse. Goes back to the fall of 1965. There was an… incident, I suppose you’d say. I’ll have Conway fill you in. He’s our knife thrower. Been with the carnival since the sixties.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“A curse?”

“What they call it,” he said.

“Going to stop you right there, big fella. I don’t live in a hut in the Dark Ages.”

“Well, my uncles swallow the whole bit. Power of suggestion cannot be denied.”

“Fine. Go on.”

“They say it clouds the minds of outsiders. The carnival settles into an area, some gruesome murders occur, the carnival pulls stakes and moves on. The cycle repeats. Reports get filed, news stories are written. Locals squawk. Nothing comes of it, though. The outside world forgets, as if the incident is erased from memory. It becomes an urban legend, a woolly tall tale to scare the kids, and everybody accepts it as myth.

“Only family remembers the details. Blood kin and those who are so tangled up with the carnival they may as well be kin. Company members who flee? They disappear or wind up in pieces. Doesn’t matter where they run. Our last sword swallower made it to Malaysia. Authorities found his arm in a hedge.

“The Gallows travels far and wide, nonetheless, the cycle continues. Sometimes it goes weeks, sometimes months, maybe even a year or two. The company members aren’t the ones who suffer the worst. Those victims in the woods? Locals. The curse cuts down innocent bystanders like a lawnmower through grass. I was around for the last occurrence. Ohio. Seventeen citizens in three weeks. Horrible, horrible shit. Not a peep in the national news.”

I gave this a few seconds to percolate in my imagination.

“Some freak has a hard-on for your uncles, okay. Obviously it’s an inside job.”

“Could be. Might be something stranger.”

“Either way, you gotta have a theory.”

“Sure, I’ve got suspicions. About all I got, though.”

“How many people work this joint?”

“A couple dozen.”

“Kinda narrows down the suspect list.”

“Jess, you don’t understand. This isn’t simple.”

“Doesn’t seem complicated either. Can’t the cops catch this murderer? Must be a trail of corpses strewn across the country. Clueless as law enforcement tends to be, brute force will out eventually. For the love of god, all those bodies, dude. Where’s Nancy Grace and Geraldo? This is national news. A CNN spectacular.”

“You’d think so,” he said.

“My instincts are razor blades, else I’d figure you were running a con, Bease. Is this reality TV? Got a camera crew stashed nearby?”

“Trust your instincts.”

“Dude, I’m open minded, as you are intimately aware. What I saw in the field, how the cops reacted… None of it adds up. Sheriff Blondie seems to be in it to win it, though. What’s his story?”

“His great-grandfather was sheriff in ’65 when the, ah, inciting incident occurred. Vinette, a woman who worked at the carnival, got butchered by a jealous suitor. That suitor went on to terrorize the countryside until Grandpa

Holcomb helped bring him down with a load of double-aught buckshot. He didn't get reelected. Von's the first Holcomb to be appointed sheriff since the curse took hold."

"You keep using that word as if it's not superstitious bullshit."

Beasley dragged a cardboard box from under a table. He emptied its contents onto the bed—a meticulously dissected series of clipped newspaper articles and photographs. The oldest were blurry, preserved from the decade of Flower Power and Vietnam; the newest had been shot recently. Articles about wild animal attacks, mysterious slayings, missing persons, all connected by some elusive thread. The connection seemed patently obvious—every article covering these incidents was juxtaposed with another featuring the Gallows Brothers Carnival.

He watched me thumb through the clippings.

"Curses might be country bumpkin nonsense, sure. I just try to see it from the rustic perspective. Forget curses. Imagine… Imagine there's a conspiracy. Nasty, violent, spans generations, and we're going to put an end to it. You and me."

"*Conspiracies* I can sink my teeth into."

"Now we're speaking the same language."

"The authorities can't make a dent in this case, what makes you think I can help?"

"Because we only need you to play a role—you get to stand in for the woman who got murdered back then. The Gallowses, Victor, our resident guru, they believe a reenactment of that original crime will allow them to interrupt it and break the curse. None of the ladies with the carnival has the guts to act as a decoy. I'm good at taking a person's measure. My hunch is, you've got a gift for survival."

I had another sip.

"Bait doesn't sound fun."

"Bait just hides the hook."

"This is about Alaska. Oh, boy, you're barking up the wrong tree if you think Eagle Talon qualifies me for what-the-fuck-ever freak Olympics you got going on here."

“Damned right it’s about Alaska. Alaska was the crucible that made you. Your life ended when that man slashed your throat. The old you went up in smoke. You’re a dancing star.”

“What did you say?” Fear stirred in my heart. Fear and an incongruous trickle of exultance. A sense of deeper purpose.

Beasley retrieved his flask.

“I recognized your face the second I walked into that tavern. What’s more, I recognized the light in your eyes. I wasn’t there looking for Ms. Goodbar or a heroine to pull our fat from the fire. I went there to get drunk because we’d failed to find a leading lady for the big night. Meeting you is fate. Can’t be anything less than the machinery of the universe clicking into place.”

“Flattering, except I still don’t understand what you want. Eagle Talon doesn’t mean anything. I went head to head with a creep and lived to tell. The media tried to spin the hero angle. That ain’t me. I’m a survivor, not a savior.”

“Remains to be seen, Jess. Come on, you need to speak with Conway. He was there during the bad days.”

“Ask the dismembered people in the den, they’d probably say *these* days are pretty lousy,” I said.

“The other bad days.”

On the way to the knife thrower’s tent, we crossed paths with Victor, the carnival’s resident fortune-teller/mentalist. Youngish guy, seven or eight years my senior. He dressed in a white shirt and jeans. Lacking the glamour and glitz of a stage, his salt-and-pepper goatee belonged on a ski bum rather than a fortune-teller or magician.

Victor did a double take at the sight of me. He clutched my hand and kissed it with unctuous ardor.

“Oh, you magnificent man,” he said to Beasley. “You have accomplished the impossible. She is perfection.”

“Yeah?” Beasley said. His cheeks seemed ruddier than usual.

“No question. Ephandra must be wild with jealousy.” Victor finally released my hand. “My dear, it is a pleasure. You must visit Conway. Go,

go! Time is short.”

The interior of the tent lay in gloom, although it didn’t matter—Conway, the knife thrower, blindfolded himself and continued to chuck the knives with eerie accuracy.

“Oh, Beasley, what have you done?” he said. He spoke in a deep, trained voice that made me marvel why he wasn’t an actor instead of a knife thrower. Tall, and muscular. Wouldn’t have guessed him for his midseventies. Raw boned with the hands of a pianist. The ace of spades tattooed on his left forearm.

He threw a brace of specially balanced knives at a slowly rotating wheel with a busty silhouette for a non-bull’s-eye. A scantily clad assistant would occupy the blank heart of the wheel whenever the curtain lifted again. I’d seen the chick, Gacy, stumble from the animal wrangler’s shack, hung over and falling out of her sun and moon robe. Every fifth or sixth cast of a knife *thunked* solidly in the center of the silhouette. Obviously Conway knew where she’d slept too. I’d caught a gander of Niko, the Lord of Beasts, and he was easy on the eyes. Conway had run afoul of an immutable law of physics—chicks dig a guy who knows his way around cats.

“I’m not sure if I should go into family matters with young Jessica,” Victor said. “For her own protection… It is unethical to inveigle her into our wretched troubles.”

“I agree,” I said. “This whole deal seems extremely personal.”

Beasley smoked a cigarette. His hair stuck out every which way from crawling into the bushes. He smelled rank. Still sexy.

“There’s a bus station half an hour down the road, Jess. Say the word.”

I didn’t give the word. Could be my heart in my throat blocked the way. My ever-intensifying death wish might’ve compelled silent complicity, or whatever wish it was that had followed me since the debacle in Alaska. There was also the distinct possibility I desired round two in the sack with Beasley. What can I say? I’m a complicated woman.

“Okay, tell it,” Beasley said to his pal the knife thrower.

Conway shrugged and orated a real potboiler. Back in 1963 when the Gallows Carnival was purchased from a central European mountebank who

shall remain nameless, some of the original players immigrated to the US and continued under new management. Chief among them, a pair of star-crossed lovers: Artemis, the animal trainer, and Vinette, lovely assistant to the Magician from the Black Sea. The magician was a handsome and acerbic, mature gentleman named Milo. Milo, a longtime widower, coveted sexy, young Vinette and schemed to win her affection from his rival Artemis.

Predictably, nothing good came of this situation. Milo failed to woo the object of his affection through honest means. He turned to skullduggery, black magic, and plain dirty tricks. It failed. Then Artemis and Vinette announced their engagement and Milo lost the remainder of his wormy, rotten mind.

On the couple's engagement night, while everyone else attended the celebratory feast, Milo slinked into the tent where the dancing bears, big cats, and wolves slept in their cages. Some beasts he poisoned and they died, foaming at the muzzle. Others he slew with a carbine. The aftermath proved so disturbing, even hardened veterans of World War II (and there'd been several on staff) wept to see the carnage.

Ah, the worst remained. Innocent Vinette, who had no conception of the magician's sickness, considering him a dear and trusted friend, slipped away from the supper to collect him. After searching high and low for the magician, she came upon the scene and screamed in horror to witness Milo skinning Artemis's prize animal, a black wolf. A massive and terrifying beast, originally captured along the Mackenzie River, the wolf hadn't gone down without a struggle—a savage slash of its fangs took a swath of the magician's face to naked bone.

Legend insisted that Vinette fled blindly, Milo on her heels. She in her dinner gown, he wrapped in the dripping pelt of the wolf, his face flayed. He brought her down in the field and tore her flesh with nails and teeth. When he had done for her, the magician fled into the hills. His wounds festered, as did his madness. Over the course of a fortnight, he roamed the land, murdering farmers, truck-stop waitresses, untended children, and other hapless folk.

Eventually, he took shelter in an abandoned wolf den on a desolate mountainside. The men of the carnival, led by an enraged and grieving Artemis, came with lanterns and rifles. Milo charged the hunters and they cut him down in a blaze of gunfire. He cursed them with his dying breath. And lo, a few years later, the carnival troupe became aware of a dark presence haunting the show. Mysterious and brutal killings began. Beasley had filled me in on the rest.

"Tonight is the fiftieth anniversary of Milo's murder of Vinette," Conway said.

"Of course it is." I considered a void, then a crack of white light, all the fire pouring forth, and a sweet young thing's face contorted in screams at the heart of the inferno.

Beasley leaned over and whispered into my ear.

"Please help. The Gallowses will make it worth your while."

We'd see, wouldn't we?

Benson and Robert Gallows returned from wherever in an antiquated flatbed truck. Fraternal twins, middle aged, dressed in fleece and plaid and denim. It appeared Benson was the drinker of the pair. His hair had gone white. Gin blossoms patterned his squashed nose. Robert's hair was dark, his features somewhat delicate. No burst blood vessels or cauliflower ears. Both wore revolvers under their coats and wolfsbane garlands around their necks.

Beasley explained that I knew the history of the alleged curse and that I hadn't entirely decided to play the role of doomed Vinette.

"What do you think?" Benson Gallows said.

"She doesn't resemble Vinette," Robert Gallows said. "However, the proper spirit counts for everything. There's also the factor that we have little choice."

"Agreed."

"Hello, boys," I said. "You two could try talking to *me* since I'm standing right here."

“You were with Beasley when he discovered the remains,” Benson Gallows said. “You haven’t hightailed it for the hills. That is an intriguing sign.”

“Technically we’re in the hills. Also, I think you’re a bunch of kooks, or you’re having me on.”

“Come now, you saw the corpses,” Robert Gallows said. “No chicanery there.”

“I’ve some experience with murderers and none with mumbo-jumbo curses. Primarily because murderers are real while curses are not.”

“The belief some hold in them is real enough to draw blood. Leaving that aside, what would it take for you to indulge us our role-playing exercise tonight?”

“Role-playing?”

Robert Gallows nodded.

“Easy as pie, my dear. You dress to the nines, enjoy a world-class supper with the company, and then retrace Vinette’s path from the night she died.”

“From the night she was horribly murdered, you mean.”

“Yes. While you’re wandering in the field, the rest of us will enact—”

“We’ll perform our mumbo-jumbo,” Benson Gallows said.

“Your hoodoo is going to do what? Trap the ghost, or werewolf? My bad, I don’t know what you boys are calling your fairy nemesis.”

“It’s a revenant, a spirit of vengeance. We want to trap it in a circuit. Then open that circuit. Not your concern. Your concern is to look pretty and follow a scripted sequence of movements.”

“So, how much?” Robert Gallows said.

I thought fast.

“Uh, ten grand. Cash.” The ol’ Mace piggy bank rattled emptily of late. My heart sank when the brothers smiled as one.

“Done,” Robert Gallows said. “Let’s make you presentable, shall we?”

“Keep that creepy sheriff away from me. He’s a deal breaker.”

“As you say. Sheriff Holcomb will not come within a country mile of your person. Right, Beasley?”

“A country mile,” Beasley said without enthusiasm.

“Then we have a deal,” Benson Gallows said. “I must warn you, however. A deal really is a deal. Sealed in blood as far as we’re concerned.”

“Indeed,” said Robert Gallows. “Should you renege on our arrangement, there will be consequences. The sheriff sounds as if he’s taken a shine to you, Ms. Mace. I am sure he’d be amenable to drumming up any number of phony charges to lock you in his jail for a while. Vagrancy and trespassing on private land among others.” At least the bastard had the decency to seem embarrassed. He shuffled his feet and glanced away. “Apologies for this element of threat. The warning is necessary.”

“Beasley,” I said.

“Hey, you shook hands.” He too averted his gaze.

Benson Gallows sighed in exasperation.

“Please, please, everyone. Dispense with the melodrama. No one is going to jail. Keep your word and all will be well. Simple as that.”

“I’ll alert the girls,” Robert Gallows said. “They’ll prepare you for the festivities.”

“Blow it out your ass,” I said. But I went along.

Mary the Magnificent and Lila the Bearded Lady took me into their trailer to get ready for the “dinner and a séance” portion of my upcoming date with Beasley. I had doubts about Mary—her spine was so twisted with muscle she hunched; her hands were enormous and rough as cobs. Nonetheless, she could’ve had a chair in a Beverly Hills salon if the magic she worked on my snarled mane with a jug of warm water and a washtub was any indicator. After bathing and styling came the glamour detailing. I’m okay with makeup, though I don’t usually apply much, if any. The ladies laid it on thick. Lila took charge, and she too exhibited a deft touch. After the detailing, they put me into a dress that would’ve done well for a night on the town visiting swanky 1960s hotspots. White and flowing, open in back and slit up to here on the side. Entirely too seductive for supper in a carnival tent in the middle of nowhere, Montana.

When they finally handed me a mirror I gasped.

The ladies' reflections smiled at one another. I turned my head and dark clouds descended.

"Lila and I ran away from the circus," Mary said. "This is where we landed."

"A grave mistake," Lila said. "Carnivals are much direr."

"Because of the psycho killers?" I admired my cleavage. "Or because this one killed the clowns? Seriously, what gives? I've hunted high and low and seen nary a trace. Isn't that carnival sacrilege?"

Mary smiled venomously.

"Scoff. We thought the curse was a joke too. Bitterly, bitterly we've learned otherwise. We are trapped."

"Someone should do something," I said, dry as toast.

"We've tried," Lila said. "This is beyond our reckoning."

"It's not beyond mine. People's heads are getting severed. Kinda physical for a ghost."

"Perhaps you are an expert in this area," Lila said.

"I straighten horseshoes with my bare hands. I can lift a grand piano on my back." Mary flexed her massive biceps. "Even I could not hope to confront the terror in the hills and survive."

"Run," Lila said. "And don't look back. You aren't a part of this yet."

"She won't run. Ever seen a more stubborn jaw? Our friend is a warrior. She will fight."

"Who's out there?" I said. "Really, no bullshit."

"Some sort of Jungian manifestation," Lila said. "The shadow personified."

"Baby, that's the best description I've ever heard." Mary kissed the bearded lady's cheek. "Whatever the truth, don't mess with it, it'll turn you to mincemeat."

"A shadow? Here I thought we were dealing with the wolf man. Silver bullets, belladonna, all that jazz." I sighed. "Come on. I've seen the horrible shit man does to man. No need for werewolves or shadow monsters."

They exchanged unhappy glances.

“A shadow personified,” Lila said, emphasizing each word. “Whether it’s man or beast is irrelevant for it is most certainly a distilled and concentrated horror that exists on the edge of human experience. Tread lightly.”

Mary lifted my dress and strapped a stiletto in its sheath to my thigh. Snugged it against the stocking. All right, that improved my mood.

“Your Ka-Bar is a good blade. Won’t help. Mine is cold iron and it has been blessed. Doubt it’ll help either. Still, you’re okay. I like you.”

“See you two at the event, I guess.”

“No,” Lila said. “We’ve decided to skip this one. Good luck, Ms. Jessica.”

“Remember to take off those heels if you need to start running,” Mary said.

“Don’t try to teach your grandma to suck eggs,” I said.

I thanked them and tottered out the door.

Benson Gallows handed me a bag with scads of rolled hundred-dollar bills stuffed inside. I stuffed the bag under Beasley’s bunk and we gathered to head for the big top and supper. The boys could spin whatever fantasy they liked. Made no difference to me. Besides, I trusted Beasley, insomuch as I trust anyone. More importantly, I trusted myself and the derringer I’d swiped from his footlocker and slipped into my sweet little handbag.

Beasley and the Gallows brothers carefully explained my duties, which were negligible, considering the amount of dough they parted with to secure my participation. They assured me that all aspects of the ritual had been assiduously researched and rehearsed. As long as I followed my cues, events would unfold smoothly. In some respects this seemed similar to the slavish preparations of hardcore Civil War reenactors. Except for the actual pile of human heads and assorted parts in the back forty.

“I’ll be out in the field tonight, just in case.” Beasley had squeezed into a cream-colored number, slicked his hair down, the whole bit.

“In case of what?”

“Uh, in case you run into a rabid coyote.”

“Or a rabid elk,” I said. “Mary and Lila seem to think—”

“Those broads are eccentric,” Beasley said.

“This is a carnival. What else would they be?”

“Yeah, well, even for a carnival.” He offered his arm.

The séance cum last supper, or whatever you’d care to name the ritual, occurred in the big top. The roadies had broken out a massive mahogany table inlaid with granite and matching chairs. They left a flap open in the ceiling. No moon yet, but plenty of stars sprinkled against the black. Jazz piped in soft and slow.

Our fateful supper included a honey-braised roast, wild rice, pineapple and grapes, sorbet, and plenty of red wine. I may have proved slightly unladylike in my enthusiasm for the various dishes. Free meals this swanky were rare.

I had nothing better to do than stuff my face, anyhow.

The girls wore dresses, although none as nice as mine, and the boys were in suits.

“Yowch!” I said as Beasley pulled out my chair. “Did I tell you how hot you look?”

His melancholy expression merely flickered.

“Do me a favor and don’t argue,” he whispered. He slipped the crucifix from his truck around my neck.

I would’ve given him grief except for the fact that bit of adornment drew the attention of every man at the table who hadn’t already surreptitiously ogled my bosom since I’d strolled in.

Though I was supposed to be the centerpiece of the evening, it seemed as if the entire company had secretly agreed to exclude me from the conversation. Fine, the silly bastards could stare at my tits and leave me out of it.

Ephandra, the lovely, long-in-the-tooth contortionist and apparent paramour of Benson Gallows, eyed my vampy dress, silver choker, purple eye shadow, and hair piled high. She smirked with voluptuous malice, pulled on a pair of ermine gloves, and lit a cigarette. She smoked it in a holder, Greta Garbo style, or somebody like that.

“Tell me more about the séance,” she said to Benson Gallows.

“You’re a little séance virgin?” His white eyebrows lifted.

“Oh, I did a séance in spectacular fashion. And *you*?” She stared at him now, like a cat at a bird.

“There was this one time… Me and a couple of my cousins spooked each other on an overnight camping trip. I was in middle school.”

“Did you make contact with the beyond?” Ephandra said.

“I made contact with my cousin’s boob for a second or two,” Benson Gallows said.

Victor the Fortune-teller frowned at this exchange.

“Perhaps this is not the occasion for jocularity.” He’d gone the extra mile and decked himself out in a fabulously extravagant black silk cape and a red turban studded with gemstones.

“*Nice*, Ben,” Ephandra said, dismissing Victor with an eye roll. “Weren’t we supposed to hit a séance gig together once?”

“No. Wait, yes—we were on a break. You called, but I had a date with, what’s her name? Crazy blonde who dragged me to the pool hall every other night.”

“Ginny the psych student? Her dad had a place in Coeur d’Alene. Slut. Whore. Bitch.”

“Yes, you met, apparently. I never got past first base, then you snatched me off the market.”

“Sorry, honey.” She stretched to stroke his arm, digging with her shiny white nails.

“What was the deal, anyhow?” he said.

Ephandra shrugged.

“The medium slaughtered a cat. Slit its throat.”

“Ahem! Now that we’re all in the proper mood—thank you, Ephandra—I propose a toast,” Robert Gallows said.

I reached for the wine and Poindexter deftly snatched the bottle.

“Vinette did not touch a drop the evening of her, er… demise. Here, try the cider.”

“Sorry, dear.” Benson Gallows poured a glass of cider from a ceramic jug and set it near my left hand. “Absolutely no blood of the vine for you. We must not risk spoiling the ritual, hey?”

I gritted my teeth. Ten thousand dollars bought this cuckoo crowd a tiny bit of forbearance. I tasted the cider and nailed Beasley with my most reproachful glare. He wilted, then raised a glass of cider in a gesture of solidarity.

“Did you folks know that Sheriff Holcomb’s mom is a gorgon?” I said.

Victor sighed.

“*The* Gorgon. There’s only one. Von’s a liar.”

“Most definitely a liar,” Ephandra said. “The only creature that let his bloated sack of lard father touch her was a hick sheepherder maid from Butte. Probably not twice, either.”

Perkins the carpenter killed the electric lamps and the music. The chamber fell into shadow, illuminated by a candelabrum and the edge of the moon now shining through the screen in the roof of the tent. The moon burned with a ruddy light.

Robert Gallows tapped his glass with a spoon.

“I propose a toast—to the memory of those poor souls taken before their time, and to a reversal of our own prolonged misfortune. Thank you, Jessica Mace, for making this restoration possible.”

Everyone drank. Beasley rose, gave a courtly bow, and exited the tent. My mouth dried and I instinctively touched the crucifix before I realized what I’d done. Stupid, inane, social programming at its worst.

“Shall we begin?” Robert Gallows said. “Jessica, be so good as to stand over there—perfect. Victor, I cede the floor.”

Victor waited for complete silence.

“Join hands.” He inhaled deeply and blew out the candles.

Took a few moments for the moonlight to kick in.

“Milo,” Victor intoned. “Milo, are you with us, you scurrilous fuck? We’ve brought you an offering. Come among us and claim your prize, if you’ve the balls.”

Well. I am not too proud to admit this spiel caught me flatfooted.

Chairs creaked. A staccato thumping emanated from the table; it and the chair creaking grew louder, becoming violent. Knuckles, rings, and bracelets clacked against wood as the shadowy company trembled and twitched, caught in a mass seizure. Their spasms ceased and the enclosure fell silent.

Was this a con job? Or had they taken a psychotropic drug and were frying together? Damned weirdoes. The lovely vision of ten grand in a bag steadied me, although I was tempted to step forward and shake Ephandra, see if she was playing possum.

"Girl, that's your cue," Perkins said, inches from my elbow. He didn't seem quite himself in the near darkness.

"Gah!" I thought about having a heart attack.

A dozen chairs squeaked as the company unfolded to their feet in a unified motion. All of them stood stock still and regarded me in eerie silence. Their eyes blazed white with captured fire from the moon.

Hell of a cue. I got going.

Outside, a cold breeze sliced through my barely there ensemble. I called upon my reserves of hardcore Alaskaness and merely shivered.

Stars flared and died. The moon burned a hole through the black and into my mind. I decided to heist a truck and haul ass for town, or anywhere directly away from the remnants of the carnival. Keys were in everything around here. I didn't heist a truck. I decided to fetch my loot from under Beasley's bed and ride shank's mare in a straight line until I hit something like civilization. Didn't do that either.

Sensible action slipped my grip. I walked toward a massive rectangular tent, domain of Hondo the Panther Lord, as I'd been instructed. My flesh tingled the way it does when I've gone over my limit of booze. Weird, since I hadn't had a snort since early in the day. I wiggled my fingers and clucked my tongue to test the theory. All systems go.

An offering, Victor had said. A human sacrifice, he'd said. Okay, he hadn't said that, merely implied it. How much danger was I in? My hair-trigger alarm system kept sending garbled messages that filtered through static.

Meanwhile, there went my sun-darkened hand on the mesh screen, and there went my feet, bearing me into a den of beasts, and there awaiting my arrival, crouched Satan, golden-black in the glare of a kerosene lantern suspended from a hook.

I call her Satan because she smoldered with an inner radiance that I'd intuited from a thousand glimpses of the devil's likeness in illuminated manuscripts of the holy and the occult. Her shadow spread across the floor and up the wall, massive and primeval and bestial.

Satan, a.k.a. Deputy Cooper, wore blu-and-white uniform pants streaked in dirt, and nothing else. Broad shouldered, narrow hipped, sinewy, her feet sank into a puddle of gory mud. Before her lay the carcass of her K-9 partner, its jaws caked in red. She'd skinned it with a flint knife from the Neanderthal King exhibit.

Deputy Cooper slowly pivoted and revealed that the dog had eaten some of her face before it died. No, I didn't vomit, quite.

"Damnedest thing," she said. "I was chilling in the cruiser. Baxter tore through his kennel and went right for me."

I almost didn't recognize the deputy, for obvious reasons. She'd also ditched the mirrored shades. Her shape twisted and thickened into steroid-fueled contortions. Her hands were bigger than Mary the Magnificent's, and those long, sharp nails weren't press-ons. She lacked much in the way of body hair. That was incongruous, I guess. Folklore and Hollywood have conditioned us to expect pointed ears and a fur coat.

We were alone in the tent. Earlier in the day, a crew had loaded the animals into traveling enclosures and cruised toward Idaho. Victor had said that the phantom of Milo wouldn't require the meat of a panther or wolf. The only force acting upon the Black Magician was his lust for Vinette. All else was pantomime. The dog's corpse and Deputy Cooper's wrecked face suggested Victor might not have possessed total command of the facts.

None of this was following the script. Dead dog, mutilated cop, me armed and dangerous.

"Good fucking god, Deputy." I pulled the derringer from my purse, aimed at her head, and cocked the hammer. The pistol felt like a toy in my fist, in the presence of evil. Had I believed in evil prior to this instant?

She drove the flint blade into the ground and straightened. Blood oozed over her breasts, painted her belly and thighs. The blood flow showed no sign of slowing. Black-gold blood.

"You smell… great," she said through impressive canines.

"Thanks," I said. "Get on the ground."

She tilted her partial death's head. Her eyes were bloodshot and yellow.

"I'm going to eat your whoring heart, Nettie."

"Okay, lady." I pulled the trigger, saw a tiny hole bore into the exposed bone of her skull. A wisp of smoke curled from the wound.

Deputy Cooper blinked.

"There's mud in your eye," she said.

Her arm looped around fast and smacked me across the chest. Oof, let me tell you. Back in junior high a kid walloped me full force with an aluminum bat. This felt kind of similar, except somebody had filled the bat with rebar and Babe Ruth slugged me with it. A flash of insight suggested that in a parallel reality, the blow had struck claws first and my insides had splashed all over the place.

I flew backward through the tent opening and landed on my ass. Here came the skull-faced wolf woman, striding toward me. Mary, dressed in her carnival tights that showed off a lot of grotesquely bulging muscles, stepped out of the shadows and clobbered her across the back of the neck with a steel wrecking bar. The steel clanged meatily. Deputy Cooper dropped to a knee and Mary hit her again like she was chopping into a log.

Deputy Cooper caught the bar on the third swing, ripped it from Mary's grasp, and slung it away. She covered her ruined face with her hands and wailed. Neither woman nor animal should be able to produce such a cry. The kind of sound you experience once and hope to never hear again. The deputy shuddered and collapsed into a fetal position and remained still. She appeared to diminish slightly, to sag and recede, as if death had taken from her a lot more than twenty-one grams. Made me seriously reevaluate my contempt for the Catholic Church and its hang-up with demonic possession. Sir Arthur C. Clarke once said that any sufficiently advanced technology would be indistinguishable from magic. In my humble opinion, that goes

double for sufficiently advanced lunacy being indistinguishable from supernatural phenomena.

"I suppose that's one way of solving the problem," Mary said.

"*Is* it solved?" I said.

"The Gallowses will have to send a postcard with the news. I'm taking Lila away from here."

Beasley's mention of the sword swallower who got chopped to bits in Malaysia occurred to me. I kept it to myself.

"Thanks, Mary. Adios."

She nodded curtly and walked away. Deputy Cooper lay there, one eye glistening as wisps of steam rose from her corpse.

I gained my feet and stumbled along the concourse. Dim lights peeped here and there from the recesses of shuttered stalls. The moon swallowed all else. I swear the moon resembled Deputy Cooper's flayed skull, and it wouldn't stay put, it rolled across the heavens to glare at me. I staggered to an empty squad car parked on the grass between the shooting gallery and a temporary-tattoo stall.

Yep, keys in the ignition, shotgun missing from the console rack. The interior reeked of wet fur. I jumped in, got her revving, and then floored it, barefoot on the cold pedal. I raced along the dirt road that curved away from the carnival. A veil of dust covered the sky and the damnable moon in my wake.

Crippling pain set in as the bouquet of survival chemicals polluting my veins diminished. Cracked ribs for sure, deep-tissue bruises in my back, everywhere. I'd bitten my tongue and jammed my neck. My feet hurt. It began to settle into my frenzied brain that I'd commandeered a patrol car, was mostly naked, had helped murder a sworn officer of the law, and worst of all, left ten grand behind. Perhaps I should turn around and retrieve the money, at any rate. Hard to split for parts unknown without a few dollars in one's pocket.

That's when the wheel wrenched in my hands. The cruiser slewed violently and I couldn't work the pedals fast enough to avert disaster. It left the road

at forty-five, flipped over, and skidded upside down until it came to a halt in the bushes.

The crash tossed me around inside the cab. Ruined my hair and tore my gorgeous dress all to shit. Might've loosened a tooth or two as well. I was partly stunned when Sheriff Holcomb got the driver-side door open and pulled me out and dumped me onto the soft ground without ceremony. He looked pissed. The pistol in his hand accentuated my impression of his mood.

"Nice shooting, Tex," I said with groggy reproach.

"Jumping Jesus lizards," he said. "My rig is totaled. Biggest clusterfuck I ever did see."

"I bet you've seen a bunch too."

He holstered his pistol with an expression of regret.

"What the hell are you doing in Coop's car? Where is she? I heard a shot. What the fuck happened?"

"Easy, easy. Give her a second." Beasley emerged from the gloom, rifle in hand. He knelt at my side and checked for broken bones. Contusions, mainly, but I didn't mind the attention. While he worked, I closed my eyes and related the appalling tale of the past few minutes. I considered editing out the part where I put a slug into Deputy Cooper's brain—admittedly, it might not have killed her, the wrecking bar swung by a carnival performer who could bench a grand piano was the most likely candidate. Once I started spilling, I couldn't stop, though.

"Real sorry about your deputy," I said at the end and wiped my eyes to emphasize the point. "Sorry about the dog, too. He was probably a good dog."

Beasley stood and faced Sheriff Holcomb.

"Shut up, Von."

"Screw you, Beasley. I didn't say anything. She's admitted—"

"To putting down a murderous psychopath. Damned good at it, isn't she? All those bodies? I'm sure lab work is going to connect your girl to the crime scene."

“Shit, man. We all were there. That scene is a mess.”

“Montana’s finest,” I said.

“Put things in order,” Beasley said. “Be the hero who solved the case.”

“Huh. Think the curse is broken?”

Beasley shrugged.

“Can’t see how it matters for you. If it is, you’re sheriff for life. If the situation remains unchanged, nobody outside of our circle is gonna remember anything in a week or two. Besides, there’s Jessica’s not-insubstantial fee. Check under my bed.”

“Yeah? How much.”

“Ten grand.”

“Beasley!” I said, too weak to jump up and slap him.

That did it. The clouds cleared from Sheriff Holcomb’s demeanor. He grinned.

“Okay, then. Okay.” He clapped Beasley’s shoulder. “Yeah, okay. Reckon I’ll mosey on back to camp and straighten everything out.”

Watching the predatory smirk and swagger of the sheriff, his easy acceptance of such a dramatic turn of events, was chilling. How many two-bit criminals had he left in the woods? How many hookers had he strangled and dumped along the highway?

I only exhaled when he tipped his hat and ambled toward town.

“Lean on me,” Beasley said. “I parked not far from here.” He half carried me to his truck and put me inside. He gunned the engine and got us moving.

“I can’t believe you gave that pumpkin-headed sonofabitch my cash.”

He chuckled.

“Von’s gonna be hot. It’s behind the seat.”

I relaxed. A hundred aches and pains faded into the background and I almost smiled. Didn’t last long—the dead cop’s face would haunt my dreams, or worse.

“Where to?”

“Home. Ride with me as far as you want.”

“Oh, is it that easy? We’re done? Weren’t you planning to trap the… spirit in that den? Sure Mary and I didn’t totally blow the whole deal?”

“I’m done is all I know. Gave it the college try. You look sort of spectacular in what’s left of that dress, in case nobody mentioned it yet.”

We continued in silence until we hit the interstate and turned east.

Beasley reached over and patted my scraped knee.

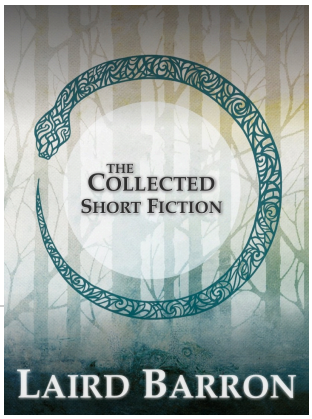
“Yep, it’s over. The moon feels different.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him that the last thing I’d seen before I booked out of there in Sheriff Holcomb’s cruiser was Deputy Cooper’s grinning corpse, or how its eyelid drooped in a ghastly wink.

Besides, Beasley was right. The moon did feel different. Surely it did.

I gave him a cheery smile and clicked on the radio. Hank Williams Sr.’s lost highway carried me into dreams.

Screaming Elk, MT



This version taken from *Swift to Chase*, 2016
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Near dusk a trucker dropped me at a tavern in Screaming Elk, MT, population 333. A bunch of locals had gathered to shoot pool and drown their sorrows in tap beer. CNN aired an hour-long feature on survivors of violent crime. The *Where is Jessica Mace?* segment popped around halfway through and I told the bartender to switch it pronto. A sodbuster on the next stool started to bark his offense, then he took a closer look at the file photo of me larger than life onscreen and things went from bad to ugly.

"You're that broad! Yeah, yeah, you're her!" Shitkicker had crossed over to the dark side of drunk. "Nice rack," he went on in a confidential tone. "I wouldn't pay a nickel for anything above the tits, though."

I threw a glass of whiskey in his face, as a lady does when her appearance is insulted by an oaf. No biggie—I'd been nursing the cheap stuff. Besides, the move was only a cover to get my knife unsheathed and pressed flat against my inner thigh, all ready to do its work. A couple of his comrades at the bar laughed. He recovered fast—animals are like that—made a fist and cocked it behind his left ear. I puckered my lips. Don't suppose that I enjoy getting punched. It's simply that I can make pain work for me if it comes to that.

Despite my gravelly voice and rough edges, I know how to play the femme fatale. I can also hold my booze. It's a devastating combo. During our youth, my brothers Elwood and Bronson were the brawlers, the steamrollers. Elwood has gone to his reward and Bronson crashes cars for a living when he isn't playing a hockey goon. Me? Let's say I *prefer* to rely upon a combination of native cunning and feminine wiles to accomplish my goals. Flames and explosions are strictly measures of last resort.

I'll put my life in mortal danger for a pile of cash. No shock there, anybody would. Goes deeper, though. I'll also venture into hazard to satisfy my curiosity, and that's more problematic. The compulsion seems to be growing stronger. Violence, at least the threat of violence, is a rush. I'm addicted to the ramifications and the complications.

As the CNN story so luridly explained, I put paid to a serial killer up in Alaska, the Eagle Talon Ripper, and nothing has been the same. It's as if the stars and the sky don't align correctly, as if the universe is off its axis by a degree or two. Since pulling that trigger I haven't figured out exactly what to do with myself. I wander the earth. It would be romantic to say I'm righting wrongs or seeking my destiny. Feels more like I'm putting my shoe into one fresh pile after another.

A good friend who worked in the people-removing business for the Mafia once told me there aren't coincidences or accidents, reality doesn't work that way. Since the first inert, super-dense particle detonated and spewed forth gas and dust and radiation, everything has been on an unerring collision vector with its ultimate mate, and every bit of the flotsam and jetsam is cascading toward the galactic Niagara Falls into oblivion.

The dude possessed a more inquisitive nature than one might expect from an enforcer by trade. He said, *Jessica, you're a dancing star being dragged toward the black hole at the ragged edges of all we know. Drawn with irresistible force, you'll level anything in your path, or drag it to hell in your wake.*

Load of horseshit, am I right? Sloppy, I-love-you-man drivel. Yet, his words come back to me as I travel east, ever east. I'm starting to believe him. I'm a dancing star and my self-determination is a facade.

Cut to the drunken asshole in the bar rearing back to knock me into next Tuesday. Not so fast, Tex, said the universe.

A rugged, burly fellow in a safari shirt and work pants stepped in and introduced himself with a left hook to the sodbuster's jaw. Put the cowboy to sleep with one blow. I hadn't needed a white knight. I had my knife and knew where to stick it. But, I must admit, the crunch of the cowpoke's jawbone and the fast-spreading blood on the scuffed floorboards thrilled me a little. A lot.

Mr. White Knight rubbed his hand. All those nicks and notches on his knuckles, like rocks that had been smacked together a thousand times.

“I’m Beasley. What are you drinking?”

“Ah, the beginning of another beautiful friendship.”

Mist flooded across the marsh and erased the country road. Rounding a bend, we were transported from present day Montana to Scottish moors circa 1840s, or a Universal Studios sound lot with Bela Lugosi poised to sweep aside his cape along with our feeble protestations.

“Can’t-find-your-own-ass-with-both-hands-and-a-flashlight-weather,” I said to cut the tension. I twisted my rings until they bit in. That night, I wore five in honor of the dead samurai lord—bands of iron, silver, and titanium on the left hand. A mood ring and a biker-large death’s head on the right. The latter pair were gifts from Mom who’d used them plenty in her skating days. Jawbreakers.

Beasley stepped on the pedal. His face by dashboard light put me in mind of Race Bannon and Doc Savage. The unbuttoned safari shirt contributed nicely. Ten, maybe fifteen years my senior, but some juice left in him; I loved that too. A crucifix dangled from the rearview mirror; also sprigs of dried flowers. More dried flowers peeked from the ashtray. I wondered if these details meant anything; made a note.

We were rocking and rolling like a motherfucker now. The rickety farm truck’s tires cried mercy. But when the moon hove nine-tenths full and full of blood over the black rim of night and screamed white-hot silver through the boiling clouds, everything stood still.

“The Gallows Brothers Carnival, huh?” I said after I caught my breath. I would have said anything to break the spell. “I heard that name somewhere. Want to say a news story. Which means somebody got maimed or murdered. Wouldn’t be news otherwise.”

He grunted and hit me with a sidelong glance.

“So, uh, you know how to shoot?” Maybe he meant the rifle rattling in the window rack behind our heads. A light gauge shotgun; nothing fabulous.

“Also, would you say you’re fast on your feet? On a scale of, oh, let’s say a chick in high heels to Carl Lewis sprinting from a lion.”

“I hate it when dudes ask me that. The line of inquiry seldom leads anywhere pleasant.”

“You dames have all had bad experiences.”

I laughed, low and nasty.

“Yeah, it’s weird. Can’t figure what the common denominator might be.”

He shut his mouth for a while, smarting. Guy like him, pain didn’t last long. A whack upside the head with a two-by-four was positive attention.

My thoughts went to a previous fling with another brutish loner type; a coyote hunter in Eastern Washington. I hoped my luck was better this go-around. I hoped Beasley’s luck was better too.

“You’re not really a carnival roadie,” I said a few miles later. “You lack a particular something or other.”

“Well, I wouldn’t get on any of the rides.”

The Gallows Brothers Carnival had set up shop in a pasture a few miles outside of town. Unfortunately, I had missed the last show. The great machinery lay cold and silent and would soon be dismantled. Beasley lived in a modular at the end of a concourse of shuttered stalls, tilt-a-whirls, and tents. All very Beaver Cleaver 1950s. The night breeze swirled sawdust and the burned powder of exploded firecrackers.

A wolf howled from the north where the forest began.

Then we were inside Beasley’s shack, barring the door behind us. Down, down into the darkness we dove, to the bottom of a blue hole at the bottom of the earth. The wolf howled again. Its pack answered and the Ponderosa pines closed ranks, as Beasley’s mighty arms closed me in.

A hazy nightlight fumed at the foot of the bunk. Beasley, with a physique straight from a picture book of Norse gods, could’ve wrestled bears, looked as if he’d done so on occasion. Once Beasley and I got going he held back for fear of breaking me, the fool. I wanted to tell him it was only really

good once it started to hurt, but I'd gone past the vanishing point and dissolved into another, primal self, the one that doesn't speak English.

He performed as his swagger advertised, or close enough. Afterward, he lay slick and aglow, perfectly scarred. I asked him if he did any acting, because he radiated mucho charisma. He only smiled boyishly and took a swig from the bottle, took it in like water. I suspected his fate would be to die horribly of cirrhosis, or under the claws of a beast, and young, or to turn fifty and appear as if he'd gone face-first into a wall, haggard as a kerosene-swilling bum. Probably the dying young deal, which meant he'd better get started soon. I kept seeing a bleached skull when I caught him in my peripheral vision.

"Gimme some sweet, sweet nothings," I said to keep him from nodding off and leaving me alone with my 2 A.M. thoughts, and alone with the howls in the wood.

"Look, doll, I'm a man of action. Sweet talk ain't my bailiwick."

"Your wick isn't going into my bailey again if you don't humor me."

"As you say." He cleared his throat. "How can you be sure you're here?"

"What, think you were humping your pillow?"

"Sorry, Jess, you started this. Maybe all of it is a projection. Or a computer program. You're a sexy algorithm looping for eternity."

We shared a cigarette. Not my brand.

"Kinda smart for a dumb guy," I said. What I knew of Beasley's past derived from a few hours over pints—ex Army, ex-footballer, a hunter, a bodyguard, expert driver. Man-at-arms slash valet and satisfied with the role. College had served as a central hub for womanizing, boozing, and playing ball.

"No offense taken, or anything." He even made petulance sound manly.

"Don't get riled, handsome. Playing dumb is your protective coloration. It's how you fool the predators. *Most* of us are fooled."

"My protective coloration is a surly disposition and a buffalo gun that'd blast a hole through a concrete bunker."

“Neither of those require smarts.” I squinted at a movie poster of Robby the Robot carrying unconscious Anne Francis against a backdrop of shooting stars, and another of Lon Chaney Jr. bursting the buttons of his natty white shirt as a devil moon blared through evergreen branches.

“Wait a second. Is that wolfsbane in the pot?”

“Jessica… you’re not a hologram, you’re a dream.” He kneaded my breast. “It had to be the right woman, but I hoped it would be a flake, a bumpkin. I was afraid you’d come here. Ever since I dreamt of you there’s been a dark spot floating in my mind. A mote.”

“Make sense, man!”

“Yeah, it’s wolfsbane.” He rolled away from me, the oldest trick in the book.

I woke to a little girl screaming her heart out, out in the darkness. Beasley gently clamped his hand over my mouth, his other arm wrapped around my waist. I wasn’t going anywhere unless I took extreme measures. Not so much of a turn-on in this context.

“It’s all right.” He spoke softly and I almost didn’t catch it. “They say an elk screams like a child. Go back to sleep.”

A long time and a lot of silence passed before he let me go.

Oatmeal and kiwis for breakfast in the commissary. Beasley introduced me around to the early-risers. *Hey, everybody, this is Jessica Mace. She’s wandering the earth. Make her feel at home.* Damned if I didn’t despite their clannishness. Free food is free food.

Strongman (actually a *strongwoman*, after a double take), Bearded Lady, Wolf Girl, Poindexter the Geek, the Knife Thrower, Ephandra the Contortionist, and Perkins and Luther—head carpenter and electrician respectively. The Gallows Brothers, Benson and Robert, weren’t on hand. The proprietors had departed on a hush-hush mission, or so Beasley intimated when I asked to meet the gents.

Beasley's request notwithstanding, I received the hairy eyeball from the company. Nobody said two words to me except for Earl, the Illustrated Man. Earl repeatedly inquired where oh where on my delectable body I might be inked. Answer: nowhere, jerk. I kind of hoped Beasley would bust his jaw too, but it didn't happen. Several children lurked on the periphery. The oldest, an adolescent girl; the youngest, a grubby boy maybe a year or two out of diapers. They gawped at me from a safe distance, until their minder, a matronly lass named Rocky, swept them away with brisk efficiency.

After breakfast, Beasley escorted me on a tour of the environs. I tasted snow. A lot of the stuff covered the mountain peaks.

"This doesn't jibe," I said. "Are you hiding from the law, or what?"

We'd moseyed a distance from the encampment. He wore a battered Australian drover's hat, light jacket, workpants, and lace-up boots. He also carried a big-ass hunting rifle slung over his shoulder. Double-barrels, very serious.

"Whatever happens, don't get scared."

"Scared of what? And, too late."

"Of nothing. I'm not on the lam, by the way. Vacation." He knelt and traced flattened grass with his entire hand. We were surrounded by an ocean of it, tall and white, dying.

"How everybody spoke to you, you've been here a while."

"Ten months next week."

"Ten months! Sounds more and more like you're on work release."

He laughed. Nice white teeth. Considering the battered condition of his face, it was a small miracle he'd kept most of them.

"I live back east. My regular employers are having a disagreement."

"Dare I ask what they do?"

"Big brains. Quantum physics, exobiology, anthropology. They're famous, infamous, one of those things. A pair of mad scientist types. They'd love to build a time machine or a doomsday device for the kicks."

"Sounds like wacky fun. I could use a spin in a time machine, for sure."

“Backward or forward?”

I shrugged, bored.

“Sorry your bosses are trying to kill each other. Family feuds are the worst.”

“It’s all the shooting that made me nervous.” He turned away and scanned the ground again.

“What’s the argument about?”

“The ethics of temporal collocation of sapient organisms.”

“No shit?”

“I shit you not. Mainly, they’re at each other’s throat about a dog.”

“Oh, I get that. *I’d* kill over a good dog.”

“Hmm. This one sure as hell is. Or it will be, after they build it.”

“Build it? Are we talking about a robot?”

“A cyborg. It—he—is a war machine. Weapons contractor is financing the project. My bosses are making history. Rex has a positronic brain. First of its kind, and Toshi and Howard are fighting over the ethics. Look, stick around a few days, we’ll fly to the compound, I’ll show you. Easier that way.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Man, I wish Rex was online. We’d make short work of…” He cleared his throat and stood. “Be seven or eight years before the prototype is even in alpha phase. Gonna have to do this the old-fashioned way.”

“Do what the old-fashioned way? Aren’t you on vacation?”

“So to speak. Personal business. I traveled with this carnival as a kid. Ran away from a bad scene at home. The Gallows took me in, gave me a job, made sure I got an education. They’re my uncles and they’re in trouble.”

“A debt of honor. How sweet.” Sweet like rat poison. Daddy the Marine had taught us kids a whole lot about honor. Honor had put him and my eldest brother into early graves. Can’t say I have much use for the sentiment.

“I didn’t pick you out of that bar simply because you’re a looker,” Beasley said. “You’re something special.”

“Huh, that’s some heavy duty charm you’re laying down.”

“Yeah, it’s exhausting. I’ll stop.”

“Since you’ve already had your way, I’m steeling myself for the worst.”

“The Gallows Carnival is cursed. I’ve come to put things in order.”

“Wait, what? A curse?”

“Right.”

“Like voodoo, desecrated Indian burial grounds kind of curse?”

He pointed to a splotch of maroon on the grass.

“Stay tuned.”

I decided to give Twenty Questions a break. I stuffed my hands into my pockets and tagged along as he inspected a rusty overgrown fence. Soon, he found a break in the wire. A black funnel bored through a copse of pine trees, juniper, and nettles. The hole had obviously formed by the crush of a massive body wallowing its way through the tangle.

Then the breeze shifted and the reek of putrefying flesh almost knocked me down. Beasley handed me his hat and unlimbered his rifle. He carried a flashlight in his left hand. Its beam didn’t cut very far into the darkness.

Motioning for me to stay put, he crouched and moved into the burrow.

“Bad idea, Beasley. Bad, very bad.” Over the stench of death, I whiffed something else, something born of musk, dank fur, sweat, and piss. This was the lair of a ravenous beast, a creature of fang and lust. The combination of scents, the crimson aura of the den, made me dizzy, made my nipples hard and my thighs weak. I slapped myself across the mouth and the sting shocked me out of my little swoon.

Maybe slightly too effective. Every birdcall, every snapped twig caused me to twitch. The shadows in the trees became sinister. I gave serious thought to leaving Beasley there, of strolling back to camp. I’d have coffee with a nip of bourbon and wait to see if he ever returned.

“Jess.” His voice floated from the tunnel, muffled and strange. “Dial 911. Ask for Sheriff Holcomb. Tell him to come right away.”

I made the call. The dispatcher asked the usual questions and said a squad car would be on site shortly. Beasley crawled from the den, shirt torn and stems in his hair. He tossed a man's severed head on the ground. Dead two or three days at most. The left eye was still intact. Blue as milk. Hours later, I still saw my shadow reflected in it, the beetles and the flies crawling around, unsure where to start.

"Five or six bodies in there," Beasley said in a hoarse voice. He lighted a cigarette. Reached for his hip flask of whiskey, glanced at the sun, and reconsidered. Then reconsidered again and down the goddamned hatch. "Gonna have to reassemble the pieces to know for sure. Lotta pieces."

"Cops are on the way."

I'm not sure if I said it to reassure myself or to warn him there'd be no more axe-murdering on my watch. I ninety-nine percent dismissed the possibility of his involvement in a massacre. My instincts are hellishly sharp when it comes to detecting the evil that lurks in the hearts of men. Beasley had issues. Cold-blooded murder wasn't one.

The sun inched across the sky. Beasley checked his watch every couple of minutes.

"Did the carnival lose a tiger?" I said. "Or a lion? The neck wound is… chunky. That's how a big cat might savage its prey." As if I knew jack shit about big cats or mauled corpses. My mouth pops into gear when I'm nervous.

"The Gallows own three panthers. All accounted for. This ain't a wild animal attack. This is a whole other thing."

I couldn't stop staring at the head, its mouth agape, teeth and tongue clotted in gore. I ran my thumb along the scar on my throat, felt a sympathetic pang, and relived the searing slash of the blade as it sawed on through.

"Here's the sheriff," Beasley said. He looked me in the eye, hard. "Be careful."

"We're hunting rabbits?" I always try to be brave.

"Don't get cute with him. He's not your friend. Take my word."

I decided to heed his warning. A bad black vibe pushed forward thick as the dust from the cop cars tearing along the road.

Two Lewis and Clark County police cruisers nosed into the field. Several cops in midnight blue suits and white Stetson hats trudged the rest of the way to us. They patted the guns on their hips. One had a German shepherd on a leash. Poor dog wanted fuck-all to do with the murder scene. He pissed himself and cowered between the legs of his mortified handler, a lantern-jawed gal in mirrored shades.

Beasley shook hands with the sheriff. Two dogs deciding whether to sniff asses or get to tearing each other apart.

Blond-bearded and heavy through shoulders and hips, Sheriff Von Holcomb seemed at least a decade under-seasoned for the post. On the other hand, one glance at the austere panorama and I concluded that finding a taker for the position might mean the electorate couldn't afford to be too picky.

"Huh, well fuck a duck." Sheriff Holcomb toed the severed head. He dabbed his mouth with a bright red handkerchief. His deputies took tape measurements and snapped photographs of the crime scene. The unluckiest of them all, a goober with a painfully-large Adam's apple, got sent into the burrow with a Maglite and a camera.

"Any idea who we're lookin' at here?"

"Alfred Fenwood." Beasley passed the sheriff a bloodied driver's license. "Don't know him. Drag the bars, you'll find Al likes cheap beer and long walks along the highway after dark."

"We got missing person reports galore over the past three weeks. Hikers, ranch hands, some folks snatched out of parking lots. Lots of wild animal calls, too. Ripped to hell pets, the usual sort of crap." The sheriff glanced at me slyly, propped his boot on the head like a kid resting on a soccer ball, and slipped off his wedding band and made it disappear.

"Oh, man, are you kidding?" I stepped back and gripped the Ka-Bar under my coat. Come to it, I'd stab a hillbilly psycho, badge or not. My shiny new policy.

"You snuffed the Eagle Talon Ripper," he said.

“No surprise you’re the lead detective in Timbuktu,” I said. A mistake because his smirk suggested he mistook contempt for flirtation.

“See my girl Friday with the dog?”

“Hard to miss.”

“Know why she wears them mirror shades? My mama was a gorgon. Deputy Cooper thinks some of the evil runs in my blood. She’s afraid to look me in the eye.” He grinned when I didn’t answer. Ogled my scars. “Wow. It’s true, you Alaska broads are tough as leather. Bastard really did slice your throat from ear to ear. Then you rose from the dead and sent him to hell. Amazing. Marcy at dispatch ran your name. It’s flagged, big time. I suppose we’re gonna have to keep tabs on you while you’re visiting our fair state. Mm-mm-mm.

“How you survive something like that, eh? Don’t seem possible. Don’t seem possible, ’tall. That freak cut you anywhere else?” He actually reached for my collar and I tensed, ready to shorten his fingers by a knuckle or two.

“Von,” Beasley said, saving the day. “We’ve got a situation. Best to focus.”

“Plainly.” Sheriff Holcomb grudgingly lowered his hand. “The Gallows think Injun-ground gonna do the trick when nothing else ever has?”

“This ground represents a full circle. Fifty years, Von.”

“Ain’t sacred. Ain’t holy. It’s elk shit and dirt.”

“Red moon last night.”

“I ain’t blind.”

“We proceed with the plan. Gallows’ orders.”

“Ha! Oh, as if I jump when they yell froggy.”

“Today you do.”

Sheriff Holcomb watched the Shepherd twist himself into a pretzel and snap at his deputy K-9 partner. The cop in mirror shades swore and danced to avoid losing a hunk of her flesh.

“Things fallin’ to pieces around here,” the sheriff said.

“And you gotta keep a lid on this mess,” Beasley said. “Unless you want the feds on it like flies.”

“Be serious, amigo. The feds won’t figure into this.”

“Fifty year is a high water mark. I assume nothing. Hell could be waiting in the wings.”

“And her?” The sheriff jerked his thumb at me. “Where she fit into your plan?”

“She’s our secret weapon.”

“You mean bait.”

“Same thing.”

“Bait?” I said.

“Secret weapon,” Beasley said.

“The sight of blood doesn’t faze you,” Beasley said after he got me back to the camp. We sat at a bench while two bearded guys in coveralls loaded boxes onto a trailer.

“Are you kidding? It fazes the shit outta me. Just that I see more than my fair share. I’m building a tolerance, one snake-bite at a time.” I took a slug from Beasley’s flask. Too early in the day, even by my Bohemian standards, but I’d earned it. “Let us recap. There’s a pile of human bodies in yonder animal den. You knew they’d be there. Or, like me, you’re super-duper unflappable.”

“Ain’t a den. It’s a trophy room. We’re not dealing with an animal. Not in the strictest sense of the term. I’m not very cool, either. Scared spitless, honestly.”

“Uh-huh. These murders are revenge-oriented, sex fantasies, rituals, what? Your sheriff pal said something about fifty years…”

“Revenge ritual. The Gallows Curse. Goes back to the fall of 1965. There was an… incident, I suppose you’d say. I’ll have Conway fill you in. He’s our knife thrower. Been with the carnival since the ’60s.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“A curse?”

“What they call it,” he said.

“Going to stop you right there, big fella. I don’t live in a hut in the Dark Ages.”

“Well, my uncles swallow the whole bit. Power of suggestion cannot be denied.”

“Fine. Go on.”

“They say it clouds the minds of outsiders. The carnival settles into an area, some gruesome murders occur, the carnival pulls stakes and moves on. The cycle repeats. Reports get filed, news stories are written. Locals squawk. Nothing comes of it, though. The outside world forgets, as if the incident is erased from memory. It becomes an urban legend, a wooly tall tale to scare the kids, and everybody accepts it as myth.

“Only family remembers the details. Blood kin and those who are so tangled up with the carnival they may as well be kin. Company members who flee? They disappear or wind up in pieces. Doesn’t matter where they run. Our last sword-swallower made it to Malaysia. Authorities found his arm in a hedge.

“The Gallows travel far and wide and the cycle continues. Sometimes it goes weeks, sometimes months, maybe even a year or two. The company members aren’t the ones who suffer the worst. Those victims in the woods? Locals. The curse cuts down innocent bystanders like a lawnmower through grass. I was around for the last occurrence. Ohio. Seventeen citizens in three weeks. Horrible, horrible shit. Not a peep in the national news.”

I gave this a few seconds to percolate in my imagination.

“Some freak has a hard-on for your uncles, okay. Obviously it’s an inside job.”

“Could be. Might be something stranger.”

“Either way, you gotta have a theory.”

“Sure, I’ve got suspicions. About all I got, though.”

“How many people work this joint?”

“A couple dozen.”

“Kind a narrows down the suspect list.”

“Jess, you don’t understand. This isn’t simple.”

“Doesn’t seem complicated either. Can’t the cops catch this murderer? Must be a trail of corpses strewn across the country. Clueless as law enforcement tends to be, brute force will out eventually. For the love of God, all those bodies, dude. Where’s Nancy Grace and Geraldo? This is national news. A CNN spectacular.”

“You’d think so,” he said.

“My instincts are razorblades, else I’d figure you were running a con, Bease. Is this reality TV? Got a camera crew stashed nearby?”

“Trust your instincts.”

“Dude, I’m open-minded, as you are intimately aware. What I saw in the field, how the cops reacted… None of it adds up. Sheriff Blondie seems to be in it to win it, though. What’s his story?”

“His great-grandfather was sheriff in ’65 when the, ah, inciting incident, occurred. Vinette, a woman who worked at the carnival, got butchered by a jealous suitor. That suitor went on to terrorize the countryside until Grandpa Holcomb helped bring him down with a load of double-aught buckshot. He didn’t get re-elected. Von’s the first Holcomb to be appointed sheriff since the curse took hold.”

“You keep using that word as if it’s not superstitious bullshit.”

Beasley dragged a cardboard box from under a table. He emptied its contents on the bed—a meticulously dissected series of clipped newspaper articles and photographs. The oldest were blurry, preserved from the decade of Flower Power and Vietnam, the newest had been shot recently. Articles about wild animal attacks, mysterious slayings, missing persons, all connected by some elusive thread. The connection seemed patently obvious—every article covering these incidents was juxtaposed with another featuring the Gallows Brothers Carnival.

He watched me thumb through the clippings.

“Curses might be country bumpkin nonsense, sure. I try to see it from the rustic perspective. Forget curses. Imagine… Imagine there’s a conspiracy. Nasty, violent, spans generations, and we’re going to put an end to it. You and me.”

“*Conspiracies* I can sink my teeth into.”

“Now we’re speaking the same language.”

“The authorities can’t make a dent in this case, what makes you think I can help?”

“Because we only need you to play a role—you get to stand in for the woman who got murdered back then. The Gallows, Victor, our resident guru, they all believe a reenactment of that original crime will allow them to interrupt it and break the curse. None of the ladies with the carnival has the guts to act as a decoy. I’m good at taking a person’s measure. My hunch is, you’ve got a gift for survival.”

I had another sip.

“Bait doesn’t sound fun.”

“Bait hides the hook.”

“This is about Alaska. Oh boy, you’re barking up the wrong tree if you think Eagle Talon qualifies me for what the fuck ever Freak-Olympics you got going on here.”

“Damned right it’s about Alaska. Alaska was the crucible that made you. Your life ended when that man slashed your throat. The old you went up in smoke. You’re a dancing star.”

“What did you say?” Fear stirred in my heart. Fear and an incongruous trickle of exultance. A sense of deeper purpose.

Beasley retrieved his flask.

“I recognized your face the second I walked into that tavern. What’s more, I recognized the light in your eyes. I wasn’t there looking for Ms. Goodbar or a heroine to pull our fat from the fire. I went there to get drunk because we’d failed to find a leading lady for the big night. Meeting you is fate. Can’t be anything less than the machinery of the universe clicking into place.”

“Flattering, except I still don’t understand what you want. Eagle Talon doesn’t mean anything. I went head to head with a creep and lived to tell. The media tried to spin the hero angle. It ain’t me. I’m a survivor, not a savior.”

“Remains to be seen, Jess. Come on, you need to speak with Conway. He’s the only one left alive from the bad days.”

“Ask the dismembered people in the den, they’d probably say *these* days are pretty lousy,” I said.

“The other bad days.”

On the way to the Knife Thrower’s tent, we crossed paths with Victor the Magician, the carnival’s resident fortune teller/mentalist. Youngish guy, seven or eight years my senior. He dressed in a white shirt and jeans. Lacking the glamour and glitz of a stage, his salt and pepper goatee belonged on a ski bum rather than a fortune teller or magician.

Victor did a double take at the sight of me. He clutched my hand and kissed it with unctuous ardor.

“Oh, you magnificent man,” he said to Beasley. “You have done the impossible. She is perfection.”

“Yeah?” Beasley said. His cheeks seemed ruddier than usual.

“No question. Ephandra must be wild with jealousy.” Victor finally released my hand. “My dear, it is a pleasure. You must visit Conway. Go, go! Time is short.”

The interior of the tent lay in gloom, although it didn’t matter—Conway the Knife Thrower blindfolded himself and continued to chuck the knives with eerie accuracy.

“Oh, Beasley, what have you done?” he said. He spoke in a deep, trained voice that made me marvel why he wasn’t an actor instead of a knife thrower. Tall, and muscular. Wouldn’t have guessed him for his mid-seventies. Raw-boned with the hands of a pianist. The Ace of Spades tattooed his left forearm.

He threw a brace of specially balanced knives at a slowly rotating wheel with a busty silhouette for a non-bull’s eye. A scantily-clad assistant would occupy the blank heart of the wheel whenever the curtain lifted again. I’d seen the chick, Gacy, stumble from the animal wrangler’s shack, hung-over and falling out of her sun and moon robe. Every fifth or sixth cast of a knife *thunked* solidly in the center of the silhouette. Obviously, Conway knew where she’d slept too. I’d caught a gander of Niko, the Lord of Beasts, and

he was easy on the eyes. Conway had run afoul of an immutable law of physics—chicks dig a guy who knows his way around cats.

"I'm not sure if I should go into family matters with young Jessica," Victor said. "For her own protection… It is unethical to inveigle her into our wretched troubles."

"I agree," I said. "This whole deal seems extremely personal."

Beasley smoked a cigarette. His hair stuck every which way from crawling into the bushes. He smelled rank. Still sexy.

"There's a bus station half an hour down the road, Jess. Say the word."

I didn't give the word. Could be my heart in my throat blocked the way. My ever-intensifying death wish might've compelled silent complicity, or whatever wish it was that had followed me since the debacle in Alaska. There was also the distinct possibility I desired round two in the sack with Beasley. What can I say? I'm a complicated woman.

"Okay, tell it," Beasley said to his pal the Knife Thrower.

Conway shrugged and orated a real potboiler. Back in 1963, when the Gallows Carnival was purchased from a central European mountebank who shall remain nameless, some of the original players immigrated to the US and continued under new management. Chief among them, a pair of star-crossed lovers: Artemis, the Animal Trainer, and Vinette, lovely assistant to the Magician from the Black Sea. The Magician was a handsome and acerbic mature gentleman named Milo. Milo, a long-time widower, coveted the sexy, young Vinette and schemed to win her affection from his rival Artemis.

Predictably, nothing good came of this situation. Milo failed to woo the object of his affection through honest means. He turned to skullduggery, black magic, and plain dirty tricks. It failed. Then Artemis and Vinette announced their engagement and Milo lost the remainder of his wormy, rotten mind.

Upon the couple's engagement night, while everyone else attended the celebratory feast, Milo slinked into the tent where the dancing bears, big cats, and wolves slept in their cages. Some beasts he poisoned and they died, foaming at the muzzle. Others he slew with a carbine. The aftermath

proved so disturbing, even hardened veterans of World War II (and there'd been several on staff) wept at the carnage.

Ah, the worst remained. Innocent Vinette, who had no conception of the magician's sickness, considering him a dear and trusted friend, slipped away from the supper to collect him. After searching high and low for the magician, she came upon the scene and screamed in horror to witness Milo skinning Artemis's prize animal, a black wolf. A massive and terrifying beast, originally captured along the Mackenzie River, the wolf hadn't gone down without a struggle—a savage slash of its fangs took a swathe of the magician's face to naked bone.

Legend insisted Vinette had fled blindly, Milo on her heels. She in her dinner gown, he wrapped in the dripping pelt of the wolf, his face flayed. He brought her down in the field and tore her flesh with nails and teeth. When he had finished her off, the magician fled into the hills. His wounds festered, as did his madness. Over the course of a fortnight, he roamed the land, murdering farmers, truck stop waitresses, untended children, and other hapless folk.

Eventually, he took shelter in an abandoned wolf den on a desolate mountainside. The men of the carnival, led by an enraged and grieving Artemis, came with lanterns and rifles. Milo charged the hunters and they cut him down in a blaze of gunfire. He cursed them with his dying breath. And lo, a few years later, the carnival troupe became aware of a dark presence haunting the show. Mysterious and brutal killings began. Beasley had filled me in on the rest.

"Tonight is the fiftieth anniversary of Milo's murder of Vinette," Conway said.

"Of course it is." I considered a void, then a crack of white light, all the fire pouring forth, and a sweet young thing's face contorted in screams at the heart of the inferno.

Beasley leaned over and whispered into my ear.

"Please help. The Gallows will make it worth your while."

We'd see, wouldn't we?

Benson and Robert Gallows returned from wherever in an antiquated flatbed truck. Paternal twins, middle-aged, dressed in fleece and plaid and denim. It appeared Benson was the drinker of the pair. His hair had gone white. Gin blossoms patterned his squashed nose. Robert's hair was dark, his features somewhat delicate. No burst blood vessels nor cauliflower ears. Both wore revolvers under their coats and wolfsbane garlands around their necks.

Beasley explained that I knew the history of the alleged curse and that I hadn't entirely decided to play the role of doomed Vinette.

"What do you think?" Benson Gallows said.

"She doesn't resemble Vinette," Robert Gallows said. "However, the proper spirit counts for everything. There's also the factor that we have little choice."

"Agreed."

"Hello, boys," I said. "You two could try talking to *me* since I'm standing right here."

"You were with Beasley when he discovered the remains," Benson Gallows said. "You haven't high-tailed it for the hills. An intriguing sign."

"Technically we're in the hills. Also, I think you're a bunch of kooks, or you're having me on."

"Come now, you saw the corpses," Robert Gallows said. "No chicanery there."

"I've some experience with murderers and none with mumbo-jumbo curses. Primarily because murderers are real while curses are not."

"The belief some hold in them is real enough to draw blood. Leaving that aside, what would it take for you to indulge us our roleplaying exercise tonight?"

"Roleplaying?"

Robert Gallows nodded.

"Easy as pie, my dear. You dress to the nines, enjoy a world-class supper with the company, and then retrace Vinette's path from the night she died."

"From the night she was horribly murdered, you mean."

“Yes. While you’re wandering in the field, the rest of us will enact—”

“We’ll perform our mumbo-jumbo,” Benson Gallows said.

“Your hoodoo is going to do what? Trap the ghost, or werewolf? My bad, I don’t know what you boys are calling your fairy nemesis.”

“It’s a revenant, a spirit of vengeance. We want to trap it in a circuit. Then open that circuit. Not your concern. Your concern is to look pretty and follow a scripted sequence of movements.”

“So, how much?” Robert Gallows said.

I thought fast.

“Uh, ten grand. Cash.” The ol’ Mace piggy bank rattled emptily of late. My heart sank when the brothers smiled as one.

“Done,” Robert Gallows said. “Let’s make you presentable, shall we?”

“Keep your creepy sheriff away from me. He’s a deal-breaker.”

“As you say. Sheriff Holcomb will not come within a country mile of your person. Right, Beasley?”

“A country mile,” Beasley said without enthusiasm.

“Then we have a deal,” Benson Gallows said. “I must warn you, however. A deal is a deal. Sealed in blood as far as we’re concerned.”

“Indeed,” Robert Gallows said. “Should you renege on our arrangement, there will be consequences. The Sheriff sounds as if he’s taken a shine to you, Ms. Mace. I am sure he’d be amenable to drumming up any number of phony charges to lock you in his jail for a while. Vagrancy and trespassing on private land among others.” At least the bastard had the decency to seem embarrassed. He shuffled his feet and glanced away. “Apologies for this element of threat. The warning is necessary.”

“Beasley,” I said.

“Hey, you shook hands.” Beasley too averted his gaze.

Benson Gallows sighed in exasperation.

“Please, please, everyone. Dispense with the melodrama. No one is going to jail. Keep your word and all will be well. Simple as that.”

“I’ll alert the girls,” Robert Gallows said. “They’ll prepare you for the festivities.”

“Blow it out your ass,” I said. But, I went along.

Mary the Magnificent and Lila the Bearded Lady took me into their trailer to get ready for the “dinner and a séance” portion of my upcoming date with Beasley. I had doubts about Mary—her spine was so twisted with muscle she hunched; her hands were enormous and rough as cobs. Even so, she could’ve had a chair in a Beverly Hills salon if the magic she worked on my snarled mane with a jug of warm water and a washtub was any indicator. After bathing and styling came the glamour detailing. I’m okay with makeup, though I don’t usually apply much, if any. The ladies laid it on thick. Lila took charge, and she too exhibited a deft touch. After the detailing, they put me into a dress that would’ve done well for a night on the town visiting swanky 1960s hotspots. White and flowing, open in back and slit up to here on the side. Entirely too seductive for supper in a carnival tent in the Middle of Nowhere, Montana.

When they finally handed me a mirror I gasped.

The ladies’ reflections smiled at one another. I turned my head and dark clouds descended.

“Lila and I ran away from the circus,” Mary said. “This is where we landed.”

“A grave mistake,” Lila said. “Carnivals are even worse.”

“Because of the psycho-killers?” I admired my cleavage. “Or because this one killed the clowns? Seriously, what gives? I’ve hunted high and low and seen nary a trace. Isn’t that carnival sacrilege?”

Mary smiled venomously.

“It is easy to scoff. We thought the curse was a joke too. Bitterly, bitterly we’ve learned otherwise. We are trapped.”

“Someone should do something,” I said, dry as toast.

“We’ve tried,” Lila said. “This is beyond our reckoning.”

“It’s not beyond mine. People’s heads are getting severed. Kinda physical for a ghost.”

“Perhaps you are an expert in this area,” Lila said.

“I straighten horseshoes with my bare hands. I can lift a grand piano on my back.” Mary flexed her massive biceps. “Even I could not hope to confront the terror in the hills and survive.”

“Run,” Lila said. “And don’t look back. You aren’t a part of this yet.”

“She won’t run. Ever seen a more stubborn jaw? Our friend is a warrior. She will fight.”

“Who’s out there?” I said. “Really, no bullshit.”

“Some sort of Jungian manifestation,” Lila said. “The shadow personified.”

“Baby, that’s the best description I’ve ever heard.” Mary kissed the Bearded Lady’s cheek. “Whatever the truth, don’t mess with it, it’ll turn you to mincemeat.”

“A shadow? Here I thought we were dealing with the wolf man. Silver bullets, belladonna, etcetera.” I sighed. “Come on. I’ve seen the horrible shit man does to man. No need for werewolves or shadow monsters.”

They exchanged unhappy glances.

“A shadow personified,” Lila said, emphasizing each word. “Whether it’s man or beast is irrelevant for it is most certainly a distilled and concentrated horror that exists on the edge of human experience. Tread lightly.”

Mary lifted my dress and strapped a stiletto in its sheath to my thigh. Snugged it against the stocking. All right, this improved my mood.

“Your Ka-Bar is a good blade. Won’t help. Mine is cold iron and it has been blessed. Doubt it’ll help either. Still, you’re okay. I like you.”

“See you two at the event, I guess.”

“No,” Lila said. “We’ve decided to skip this one. Good luck, Ms. Jessica.”

“Remember to take off those heels if you need to start running,” Mary said.

“Don’t try to teach your grandma to suck eggs,” I said.

I thanked them and tottered out the door.

Benson Gallows handed me a bag with scads of rolled hundred dollar bills stuffed inside. I stashed the bag under Beasley's bunk and we gathered to head for the big top and supper. The boys could spin whatever fantasy they liked. Made no difference to me. Besides, I trusted Beasley, insomuch as I trust anyone. More importantly, I trusted myself and the belly gun, a .25 caliber derringer I'd swiped from his footlocker and slipped into my sweet little handbag.

Beasley and the Gallows Brothers carefully explained my duties, which were negligible, considering the amount of dough they parted with to secure my participation. They assured me all aspects of the ritual had been assiduously researched and rehearsed. As long as I followed my cues, events would unfold smoothly. In some respects, this felt akin to the slavish preparations of hardcore Civil War re-enactors. Except for the actual pile of human heads and assorted parts in the back forty.

"I'll be out in the field tonight, in case." Beasley had squeezed into a cream-colored number, slicked his hair down, the whole bit.

"In case of what?"

"Uh, in case you run into a rabid coyote."

"Or a rabid elk," I said. "Mary and Lila seem to think—"

"Those broads are eccentric," Beasley said.

"This is a carnival. What else would they be?"

"Yeah, well, even for a carnival." He offered his arm.

The séance cum last supper, or whatever you'd care to name the ritual, occurred in the big top. The roadies had broken out a massive mahogany table inlaid with granite and matching chairs. They left a flap open in the ceiling. No moon yet, but plenty of stars sprinkled against the black. Jazz piped in soft and slow.

Our fateful supper included a honey-braised roast, wild rice, pineapple and grapes, sorbet, and plenty of red wine. I may have proved slightly unladylike in my enthusiasm for the various dishes. Free meals this swanky were rare.

I had nothing better to do than stuff my face, anyhow.

The girls wore dresses, although none as nice as mine, and the boys were in suits.

"Yowch!" I said as Beasley pulled out my chair. "Did I tell you how hot you look?"

His melancholy expression merely flickered.

"Do me a favor and don't argue," he whispered. He slipped the crucifix from his truck around my neck.

I would've given him grief except for the fact that bit of adornment drew the attention of every man at the table who hadn't already surreptitiously ogled my bosom since I'd strolled in.

Though I was supposed to be the centerpiece of the evening, it seemed as if the entire company had secretly agreed to exclude me from the conversation. Fine, the silly bastards could stare at my tits and leave me out of it.

Ephandra, a lovely, long-in-the-tooth contortionist and apparent paramour of Benson Gallows, eyed my vampy dress, silver choker, purple eyeshade, and hair piled high. She smirked with voluptuous malice, pulled on a pair of ermine gloves, and lit a cigarette. She smoked it in a holder, Greta Garbo-style, or some other Golden Age actress.

"Tell me more about the séance," she said to Benson Gallows.

"You're a little séance virgin?" His white eyebrows lifted.

"Oh, I did a séance in spectacular fashion. And *you*?" She stared at him now, like a cat at a bird.

"There was this one time… Me and a couple of my cousins spooked each other on an overnight camping trip. I was in middle school."

"Did you make contact with the beyond?" Ephandra said.

"I made contact with my cousin's boob for a second or two," Benson Gallows said.

Victor the Fortune Teller frowned at this exchange.

"Perhaps this is not the occasion for jocularity." He'd gone the extra mile and decked himself out in a fabulously extravagant black silk cape and a red turban studded with gemstones.

“*Nice*, Ben,” Ephandra said, dismissing Victor with an eye-roll. “Weren’t we supposed to hit a séance gig together once?”

“No. Wait, yes—we were on a break. You called, but I had a date with, what’s her name? Crazy blonde who dragged me to the pool hall every other night.”

“Ginny the psych student? Her dad had a place in Coeur d’ Alene. Slut. Whore. Bitch.”

“Yes, you met, apparently. I never got past first base, then you snatched me off the market.”

“Sorry, honey.” She stretched to stroke his arm, digging with her shiny white nails.

“What was the deal, anyhow?” he said.

Ephandra shrugged.

“The medium slaughtered a cat. Slit its throat.”

“Ahem! Now that we’re all in the proper mood—thank you, Ephandra—I propose a toast,” Robert Gallows said.

I reached for the wine and Poindexter deftly snatched the bottle.

“Vinette did not touch a drop the evening of her, er… demise. Here, try the cider.”

“Sorry, dear.” Benson Gallows poured a glass of cider from a ceramic jug and set it near my left hand. “Absolutely no blood of the vine for you. We must not risk spoiling the ritual, hey?”

I gritted my teeth. Ten thousand dollars bought this cuckoo crowd a tiny bit of forbearance. I tasted the cider and nailed Beasley with my most reproachful glare. He wilted, then raised a glass of cider in a gesture of solidarity.

“Did you folks know that Sheriff Holcomb’s mom is a gorgon?” I said.

Victor sighed.

“*The* Gorgon. There’s only one. Von’s a liar.”

“Most definitely a liar,” Ephandra said. “The only creature that let his bloated sack of lard father touch them was a hick sheep-herder maid from Butte. Probably not twice, either.”

Perkins the Carpenter killed the electric lamps and the music. The chamber fell into shadow, illuminated by a candelabrum and the edge of the moon now shining through the screen in the roof of the tent. The moon burned with a ruddy light.

Robert Gallows tapped his glass with a spoon.

“I propose a toast—to the memory of those poor souls taken before their time, and to a reversal of our own prolonged misfortune. Thank you, Jessica Mace, for making this restoration possible.”

Everyone drank. Beasley rose, gave a courtly bow, and exited the tent. My mouth dried and I instinctively touched the crucifix before I realized what I’d done. Stupid, inane, social programming at its worst.

“Shall we begin?” Robert Gallows said. “Jessica, be so good as to stand over there—perfect. Victor, I cede the floor.”

Victor waited for complete silence.

“Join hands.” He inhaled deeply and blew out the candles.

Took a few moments for the moonlight to kick in.

“Milo,” Victor intoned. “Milo are you with us, you scurrilous fuck? We’ve brought you an offering. Come among us and claim your prize, if you’ve the balls.”

Well. I am not too proud to admit this spiel caught me flat-footed.

Chairs creaked. A staccato thumping emanated from the table; it and the chair-creaking grew louder, becoming violent. Knuckles, rings, and bracelets clacked against wood as the shadowy company trembled and twitched, caught in a mass seizure. Their spasms ceased and the enclosure fell silent.

Was this a con job? Or had they taken a psychotropic drug and were frying together? Damned weirdos. The lovely vision of ten grand in a bag steadied me, although I was tempted to step forward and shake Ephandra, see if she was playing possum.

“Girl, that’s your cue,” Perkins said, inches from my elbow. He didn’t seem quite himself in the near darkness.

“Gah!” I thought about having a heart attack.

A dozen chairs squeaked as the company unfolded to their feet in a unified motion. All of them stood stock still and regarded me in eerie silence. Their eyes blazed white with captured fire from the moon.

Hell of a cue. I got going.

Outside, a cold breeze sliced through my barely-there ensemble. I called upon my reserves of hardcore Alaska-ness and merely shivered.

Stars flared and died. The moon burned a hole through the black and into my mind. I decided to heist a truck and haul ass for town, or anywhere directly away from the remnants of the carnival. Keys were in everything around here. I didn't heist a truck. I decided to fetch my loot from under Beasley's bed and ride shank's mare in a straight line until I hit something like civilization. But, no. I didn't do the smart, obvious thing. Sensible action slipped my grip.

I walked toward a massive rectangular tent, domain of Hondo the Panther Lord, as I'd been instructed. My flesh tingled the way it does when I've gone over my limit of booze. Strange, since I hadn't had a snort since early in the day. I wiggled my fingers and clucked my tongue to test the theory. All systems go.

An offering, Victor had said. A human sacrifice, he'd said. Okay, he hadn't said as much, merely implied it. How much danger was I in? My hair-trigger alarm system kept sending garbled messages filtered through static. Meanwhile, there went my sun-darkened hand on the mesh screen, and there went my feet, bearing me into a den of beasts, and there awaiting my arrival, crouched Satan, golden-black in the glare of a kerosene lantern suspended from a hook.

I name her Satan because she smoldered with an inner radiance I'd intuited from a thousand glimpses of the Devil's likeness in stained glass windows and illuminated manuscripts of the holy and the occult. Her shadow spread across the floor and up the wall, massive and primeval and bestial.

Satan, AKA Deputy Cooper who served as Sheriff Holcomb's K-9 expert, wore blue and white uniform pants streaked in dirt, and nothing else. Broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, sinewy, her feet sank into a puddle of

gory mud. Before her, lay the carcass of her K-9 partner, its jaws caked in red. She'd skinned it with a flint knife from the Neanderthal King exhibit.

Deputy Cooper slowly pivoted and revealed that the dog had eaten some of her face before it died. I swallowed bile.

"Damndest thing," she said. "I was chilling in the cruiser. Baxter tore through his kennel and went right for me."

I almost didn't recognize the deputy, for obvious reasons. She'd also ditched the mirrored shades. Her shape twisted and thickened into steroid-fueled contortions. Her hands were bigger than Mary the Magnificent's, and those long, sharp nails weren't press-ons. Incongruously, she lacked much in the way of body hair. Folklore and Hollywood have conditioned us to expect pointed ears and a fur coat.

We were alone in the tent. Earlier in the day, a crew had loaded the animals into traveling enclosures and cruised toward Idaho. Victor had said that the phantom of Milo wouldn't require the meat of a panther or wolf. The only force acting upon the Black Magician was his lust for Vinette. All else was pantomime. The dog's corpse and Deputy Cooper's wrecked face suggested Victor might not have possessed total command of the facts.

None of this was following the script. Dead dog, mutilated cop, me armed and dangerous.

"Good fucking God, Deputy." I pulled the derringer from my purse, aimed at her head, and cocked the hammer. The pistol felt like a toy in my fist, in the presence of evil.

She drove the flint blade into the ground and straightened. Blood oozed over her breasts and painted her belly and slicked her pants. The blood flow showed no sign of slowing. Black-gold blood.

"You smell… great," she said through impressive canines.

"Thanks," I said. "Get on the ground."

She tilted her partial death's head. Her eyes were bloodshot and yellow.

"I'm going to eat your whoring heart, Nettie."

"Okay, lady." I pulled the trigger, saw a tiny hole bore into the exposed bone of her skull. A wisp of smoke curled from the wound.

Deputy Cooper blinked.

“There’s mud in your eye,” she said.

Her arm looped around fast and smacked me across the chest. Oof, let me tell you. Back in junior high Julie Vellum drop-kicked me in the head. Another time a kid walloped me full force with an aluminum bat. This felt kind of similar, except somebody had filled the bat with rebar and Babe Ruth slugged me with it. A flash of insight suggested that in a parallel reality, the blow had struck claws-first and my insides had splashed all over the place.

I flew backward through the tent opening and landed on my ass. Here came the skull-faced wolfwoman, striding toward me. Mary, dressed in her carnival tights that showed off a lot of grotesquely-bulging muscles, stepped out of the shadows and clobbered her across the back of the neck with a steel wrecking bar. The steel clanged meatily. Deputy Cooper dropped to a knee and Mary hit her again like she was chopping into a log.

Deputy Cooper caught the bar on the third swing, ripped it from Mary’s grasp and slung it away. She covered her ruined face with her hands and wailed. Neither woman nor animal should be able to produce such a cry. The kind of sound you experience once and hope to never hear again. The deputy shuddered and collapsed into a fetal position and remained still. She appeared to diminish slightly, to sag and recede, as if death had taken from her a lot more than twenty-one grams. Made me seriously reevaluate my contempt for the Catholic Church and its hang-up with demonic possession. Sir Arthur C. Clarke once said that any sufficiently advanced technology would be indistinguishable from magic. In my humble opinion, that goes double for sufficiently advanced lunacy being indistinguishable from supernatural phenomena.

“I suppose that’s one way of solving the problem,” Mary said.

“Is it solved?” I said.

“The Gallows will have to send a postcard with the news. I’m taking Lila away from here.”

Beasley’s mention of the sword swallower who got chopped to bits in Malaysia occurred to me. I kept it to myself.

“Thanks, Mary. Adios.”

She nodded curtly and walked away. Deputy Cooper lay there, one eye glistening as wisps of steam rose from her corpse.

I gained my feet and stumbled along the concourse. Dim lights peeped here and there from the recesses of shuttered stalls. The moon swallowed all else. I swear the moon resembled Deputy Cooper’s flayed skull, and it wouldn’t stay put, it rolled across the heavens to glare at me. I staggered to an empty squad car parked on the grass between the shooting gallery and a temporary-tattoo stall.

My lucky night, keys in the ignition, shotgun missing from the console rack. The interior reeked of wet fur. I jumped in, got her revving, and then floored it, barefoot on the cold pedal. I raced along the dirt road that curved away from the carnival. A veil of dust covered the sky and the damnable moon in my wake.

Crippling pain set in as the bouquet of survival chemicals polluting my veins diminished. Cracked ribs for sure, deep tissue bruises in my back, everywhere. I’d bitten my tongue and jammed my neck. My feet hurt. It began to settle into my frenzied brain that I’d commandeered a patrol car, was mostly naked, had helped murder a sworn officer of the law, and worst of all, left ten grand behind. Perhaps I should turn around and retrieve the money, at any rate. Hard to split for parts unknown without a few dollars in one’s pocket.

That’s when the wheel wrenched in my hands. Front tire blown. The cruiser slewed violently and I couldn’t work the pedals fast enough to avert disaster. It left the road at forty-five, flipped over and skidded upside down until it came to a halt in the bushes.

The crash tossed me around inside the cab. Ruined my hair and tore my gorgeous dress all to shit. Might’ve loosened a tooth or two as well. I was still partly stunned when Sheriff Holcomb got the driver side door open and pulled me out and dumped me onto the soft ground without ceremony. He looked pissed. The pistol in his hand accentuated my impression of his mood.

“Nice shooting, Tex,” I said with groggy reproach.

“Jumping Jesus lizards,” he said. “That rig is totaled. Biggest clusterfuck I ever did see.”

“I bet you’ve seen a bunch too.”

He holstered his pistol with an expression of regret.

“What the hell are you doing in Coop’s car? Where is she? I heard a shot. What the fuck happened?”

“Easy, easy. Give her a second.” Beasley emerged from the gloom, rifle in hand. He knelt at my side and checked for broken bones. Contusions, mainly, but I didn’t mind the attention. While he worked, I closed my eyes and related the appalling tale of the past few minutes. I considered editing out the part where I put a slug into Deputy Cooper’s brain—admittedly, it might not have killed her, the wrecking bar swung by a carnival performer who could bench a grand piano was the most likely candidate. Once I started spilling, I couldn’t stop, though.

“Real sorry about your deputy,” I said at the end and wiped my eyes to emphasize the point. “Sorry about the dog, too. He was probably a good dog.”

Beasley stood and faced Sheriff Holcomb.

“Shut up, Von.”

“Screw you, Beasley. I didn’t say anything. She’s admitted—”

“To putting down a murderous psychopath. Damned good at it, isn’t she? All those bodies? I’m sure lab work is going to connect your girl to the crime scene.”

“Shit, man. We were all there. That scene is a mess.”

“Montana’s finest,” I said.

“Put things in order,” Beasley said. “Be the hero who solved the case.”

“Huh. Think the curse is broken?”

Beasley shrugged.

“Can’t see how it matters for you. If it is, you’re sheriff for life. If the situation remains unchanged, nobody outside of our circle is gonna remember anything in a week or two. Besides, there’s Jessica’s not insubstantial fee. Check under my bed.”

“Yeah? How much.”

“Ten grand.”

“Beasley!” I said, too weak to jump up and slap him.

That did it. The clouds cleared from Sheriff Holcomb’s demeanor. He grinned.

“Okay, then. Okay.” He clapped Beasley’s shoulder. “Yeah, okay. Reckon I’ll mosey on back to camp and straighten everything out.”

Watching the predatory smirk and swagger of the sheriff, his easy acceptance of such a dramatic turn of events, was chilling. How many two-bit criminals had he left in the woods? How many hookers had he strangled and dumped along the highway?

I only exhaled when he tipped his hat and ambled toward town.

“Lean on me,” Beasley said. “I parked not far from here.” He half carried me to his truck and put me inside. He gunned the engine and got us moving.

“I can’t believe you gave that pumpkin-headed sonofabitch my cash.”

He smiled.

“Von’s gonna be hot. It’s behind the seat.”

I relaxed. A hundred aches and pains faded into the background and I almost smiled. Didn’t last long—the dead cop’s face would haunt my dreams, or worse.

“Where to?”

“Home. Ride with me as far as you want.”

“Oh, is it that easy? We’re done? Weren’t you planning to trap the… spirit in that den? Sure Mary and I didn’t totally blow the whole deal?”

“I’m done is all I know. Gave it the college try. You look sort of spectacular in what’s left of that dress, in case nobody mentioned it yet.”

We continued in silence until we hit the interstate and turned east.

Beasley reached over and patted my scraped knee.

“Yep, it’s over. The moon feels different.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him the last thing I’d seen before I booked out of there in Sheriff Holcomb’s cruiser was Deputy Cooper’s grin, her eyelid

sliding down in a ghastly wink. Could have been my imagination. What else?

Besides, Beasley was right. The moon did feel different. Surely it did.

I gave him a cheery smile and rested my head against the window. We drove deep into the night, cleaving through a vault of stars. The air thinned until the stars burned through the windshield. Beasley pulled over at a motel and got us a room with a radio and a box television. After showering off the blood, grime, and stink, I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. My eyes were ringed from exhaustion and wide with the exultant aftermath of terror I'd come to recognize. Question was, were these the eyes of a doomed woman? I blinked, no closer to an answer.

Beasley had fallen onto the narrow bed, fully dressed. He snored counter-time to golden country oldies. I lay next to him, my hand on his arm, and regarded the ceiling. Those water-stained tiles were the bottom of an inverted tea cup, promising me, warning me of my fate. I waited for a coyote to yip or a wolf to howl. Waited some more as Hank Williams Sr.'s lost highway carried me into dreams.

(Little Miss) Queen of Darkness

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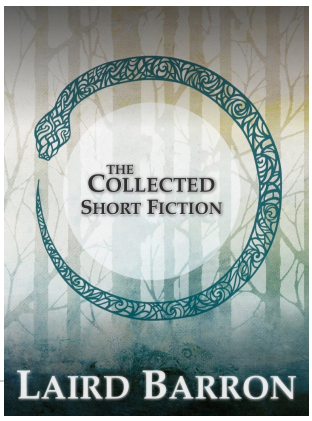


I: Initiation

I write this: *The cops don't know what really happened in Eagle Talon. Lies, all lies. Ask Jessica, if I ever see her again.* This isn't about Eagle Talon, however. I've never even been. No sir, Bob, if it's about anything, it's about that debutante ball Zane throws in his basement at the tail end of high school, 1998. The unfinished basement with the raw earth and a tunnel that smells of mildew and dankness. The tunnel is maybe three by three and is actually a cleft in the rock of the hill upon which this house rests.

I can't forget that hole in the ground. It drills through my mind.

Yeah, Shit Creek describes an imperfect circle right back to the bad old days. Oh, the party is rad, though: heavy metal, booze, drugs, psychedelic lights. The kids slam-dancing. Me with my hand on Stu Whitlock's hip the whole time and nobody the wiser. Then that damned hick brat Dave Teague racing overhead, naked and covered in blood (so the legend goes), screaming his head off. Ruins everything …

I also write: *People call it this or that, but our club doesn't have a name. It didn't originate in Alaska. It was around before Alaska. We don't suckle at the breast of a god, it suckles at ours.* Unfortunately, devoid of context, that stuff reads like the Unabomber's doodles.

Next, I make a list. Were I to title it, the title would be "People Who Died," like the song. Such an everyman tune because everybody can relate, right? The partial list is scribbled in a black moleskin notebook. I've left bloody fingerprints on the pages. Many of the names are illegible from the smears, or redaction with a magic marker. Names changed to protect the guilty.

Four remain intact in truth and form. Hell if I know whether that's significant or not.

Zane Tooms & Julie Vellum: They could've been the power couple from the lowest circle of Hell. Alas, Zane already had a loyalist and Julie's not the kind to need any. These are your villains. Nuff said.

Steely J: Just about tall enough to play pro basketball. He's Zane's major domo. The Renfield to Zane's Dracula. Loyal through thick and thin—and I'm not kidding, I literally mean that. We called Zane Fat Boy Tooms until his folks croaked and he started in with the horse de-wormer and got slenderized. Steely J stuck with him down the line. Steely is what you might call inscrutable. Looks nice, dresses nice, and plays nice, if a teensy bit of a cold fish. His features lag behind whatever message his brain is sending. Somebody behind the curtain throws a switch and he smiles. Or, he smiles and picks up a claw hammer and comes for you. The Sandburg poem about fog creeping on little cat feet? That's Steely J. Except six-six with a hammer.

Vadim: My buddy Vadim often brags that he's an expert in Savate. He paid two hundred dollars for a six week course at a strip mall. I let him drag me in once to meet the instructor (mainly I wanted to ogle some studly hotties kicking and stretching, but whatev) and the dude had a bunch of diplomas, certificates, and autographed photos of macho celebrities I didn't care to recognize. The French version of hi-ya for an hour. Bo-oring.

The strip mall closed shop when the economy cratered in '09. Not before Vadim got what he needed, however. He asserts that Savate is the elite of the elite fighting arts, natch. I don't know my foot from my elbow when it comes to violence. I'm a lover, always have been. That's why I keep the numbers of a few bigger, tougher friends in my Rolodex.

Vadim talks lots of shit every time we go clubbing and the fraternity bros start hitting on me, which they totally do. I clutch his sleeve and say, "Whoa, there stud. They're just being friendly. Get mama another margarita, 'kay?" Vadim shoots the bros a venomous parting glare and then toddles off to fetch my drink. His thighs bulge his cargo pants so that he really does toddle. I think of it as having my own Siberian tiger on a leash,

except with pouty, pouty lips, and six-pack abs! Nice while it lasted. He's dead too.

End of list.

Go back, not the whole way, not to high school. Three and a half years is far enough. We have gathered, dearly beloved. Gathered to sign on the dotted line and change the course of our stars forever. What a load of crap. *I'm* motivated by fascination, boredom, skepticism. Some of the others are buggy-eyed true believers. Have at it, morons.

The sun is bleeding out all over the Chugach Mountains. An inlet, ice-toothed and serpentine, lies below us somewhere, wrapped by mist that's freezing into black pearl. I'm not captivated by the austere beauty of the far north as seen through frosty picture windows. My feet are cold and I'm bored. I'm an L.A. girl trapped inside an L.A. boy. This arctic weather is for the birds.

Julie Five says to me, "Oh, Ed, quit sulking. You detest it so much, why'd you come? Nut up or shut up." She finishes me off with a sweet as pie smile. I beam one right back. Anybody more than arms-length away might get the impression we're peaches and cream. Big sister, little brother at worst. Then again, it's an intimate gathering of former classmates. Most of the others know how it is with us because it's been this way with us since junior high. Her nickname is JV, but I call her Julie Five. Our mutual acquaintance, the lamentably absent Jessica M, coined that bit of mockery. Sure, we're supposed to pity Julie Five for cowering in a closet while her lover got noisily disemboweled by the Eagle Talon Ripper in the winter of 2012, but her sob story doesn't move me—"victim-of-unspeakable-tragedy" is scraping the bottom of the barrel on a white trash reality show. Her sneaky path to fifteen minutes of fame and she didn't even try to stop the murdering bastard. Oh, dear heavens, no—she left that chore to her archrival, Jessica M, the girl who got the cover of *Black Belt Magazine* and interviews with every cable news show in existence. Good for Jess. Screw Julie Five. She's cowardly, treacherous, and mean. She like totally vacillates between vocal fry and ending every sentence on a rising note. Basically the darkest valley girl in the history of valley girls. I'd feed her a cup of lye if I had some.

Our host, Zane Tooms, stares at the sunset the way a man with an appointment compulsively checks his watch. He's dressed in a white shirt and black pants. No shoes. He never wears shoes at home. His shirt is unbuttoned two notches. A metallic chain gleams from the opening. I've seen the pendant when Zane had his shirt off—a smallish lump of vaguely horrid metal, or bone. Its color shifts, the film of a lizard's eye rolling aside. He folds his napkin, rises from his seat (throne) at the head of the table, and walks further into the decrepit mansion.

The house juts from a knoll with an impressive view of tidal flats and occasionally the water. The knoll was a bear den until hunters exterminated the bears and poured concrete back in when-the-hell-ever. Exactly the kind of place natives would say, "Don't build here! Bad medicine!" White Man doesn't give a shit about any of that and here we are. Even so, the Tooms residence lacks the sinister gravitas of a classic, gothic haunted castle. Made over once too often, the latest reconstructive surgery has rendered it a weird amalgam of art deco and 60s kitsch. His home might have been cozy in its heyday. He let it go to seed after the senior Toomses shuffled into the next life. He travels and can't be bothered with upkeep. I've told him he needs a decorator because the ambiance sucks. Frontier chic it is not. Swear to god he doesn't even live here, it's so borderline derelict. If Zane confessed he only showed up to unlock the joint and turn on the lights half an hour before his guests arrived, I wouldn't be shocked.

The basement is carved into the den itself and mostly unfinished. Lots of exposed beams, pipes, and dirt. I shudder to think. Tunnels bore past the glow of any lamp. Can't say I'm impressed with the remote location or the bear catacombs. Way too rustic for this girl. What does impress me is Zane himself. These days, after slimming his chubby cheeks and beer gut, he's drop dead gorgeous. A walking, talking Ken Doll; brunet model. He oozes primal charisma. Night and day from the acne-riddled, blimpo Zane that we knew and abhorred as kids. I'd kill to learn his secret and that's part of why I RSVP'd yes on the invitation last month; why I ditched everything I had cooking in Cali and came like a dog to her master's whistle.

Steely J gives us a significant nod. We guests push away from half-empty plates and migrate into the parlor, wine coolers and rum and cokes in hand. I loathe the parlor. It's cold and dank, the books are moldy, and the stuffed

moose head that presides here has gone blind with rot. The notion of accidentally brushing against something icky gives me the shivers.

Zane unlocks a cabinet and sets a jewelry box upon the big circular granite table we're seated around. The table is slightly concave. Several parallel grooves radiate from the edge to a depression in the center. As for the jewelry case, it is an unpleasant box with the lacquer stripped. The wood is scored and blanched by patterns of fungal decay. An eighteenth-century caravel's lost antique dredged from the muck at the bottom of Cook Inlet in 1979, or so my peeps testify. Inside the box, a ring nests in crushed velvet. An indelicate description for those playing at home—its color is similar to a blood clot glistening against tissue paper. He plucks the ring and casually passes it to Morton, just like that. No formalities whatsoever.

"Damn, it's heavy," Morton says. Morton always sounds bemused or surprised.

"Don't drop it," Julie Five says. She's cool and eager. She gave Morton a hummer last August while we were all on a tour bus at Denali State Park. They speak to each other with barely restrained antipathy. "Drop it, and it's ten demerits." Gawd, I hate her smug, bitchy tone. I hate that Morton accepted her blowjob and turned me down flat. Heel.

"By the way, the table isn't granite," Zane says as if he's peeked into my brain. His gaze is cruel. "Another rock entirely. There are chains of sea caves in the Aleutians. This table is carved from the bedrock of those caves. Men died acquiring this on my behalf." He looks at Morton. "Okay, Mort. Time to get bitten." He is indulgent, yet commanding. Two decades in Europe, and farther abroad, will do that to a guy, I suppose. Julie Five says Zane spent months lost in a desert and went barking mad. Eating-his-own-shoelaces fucked in the head. Wouldn't guess it to feast your eyes upon him, or maybe you would. The corners of his eyes twitch if you catch it at the right moment.

Morton makes a show of examining the ring, as if a middle manager role at an office supply store qualifies him to appraise jewelry. He's enjoying the spotlight. "Is this the Ouroboros?"

"Don't be ridiculous." Zane's sneer almost spoils the plastic charm of his perma-smile. I've long assumed his genial urbanity is a façade for darker

impulses. Doesn’t bother me. Everybody has got another side. It’s exciting.

“If there were a *real* Dracula Ring, this would be the one,” Julie Five says. “Lugosi’s was pretty. Fake. Fake. Fake.” She rocks, barely suppressed. Her face is so very animated. I’ve seen that expression. It’s the wide-eyed, lips slightly parted expression women at boxing matches wear. I’m sure the rich hoes in Rome did it the same when they attended the gladiatorial games.

The ring is formed of thick, intertwined strands of corroded iron. There’s a jagged gap opposite the shank. Whether from damage or by design, I haven’t a clue. The shank is set with the aforementioned gory gemstone that also, if you squint, resembles a death’s head in the way a thundercloud might resemble the skull of an angry god. The stone fitfully glints with the light from the table lamp. Almost a twin to the pendant hanging from Zane’s neck.

“I thought it’d be a thumb prick.” Morton slips the ring onto his finger.

“Ha ha, you said *prick.*” I laugh, but not really. No, not really.

“Dude,” Vadim says with ample foreboding. “This shit is how you get sepsis or peritonitis or something.”

“Quiet, punk, you’re next.” Julie Five grins at him. I think of a northern pike opening its needle-fanged jaws to slurp down a hook.

Zane raises his eyebrow. “A dribble of claret for the cause seems reasonable. The price for betrayal is a blood eagle. JV’s idea. Be warned.”

“What’s a blood eagle?” I say.

“You don’t want one,” Vadim says.

Steely J excuses himself. He steps through a panel near a bookcase and that’s the last I see of him. I think it’s the very last time *anybody* sees him for a few years. Candice, his latest girlfriend remains at the table with an expression of abandonment. She’s had too many wine coolers.

Neither Clint nor Leo speak. They’re nervous, I can tell. Leo is a bit green around the gills. Real hard cases. Both of them agitated and wheedled to be included, and now their knees are knocking. And why are they spooked? The ceremony is bullshit. High school melodrama. This is supposed to be mock serious, like fucking about with Ouija boards and séances or homoerotic fraternity paddling rituals.

“Seven is a good number,” Zane says. He’s not counting himself, obviously. He’s playing Satan. “Seven were the apprentices in the Devil’s Grotto.”

“Power number, baby,” Julie Five says, Ed McMahon to his Johnny Carson.

We all stare at one another. Similar to gazing into a mirror—after a while, everybody is as plastic as Zane. I poke Morton in the ribs. Somebody has to be the first to leap and he’s it. He makes a fist. Blood begins to flow. The blind moose watches as we each take our turn.

God, do You remember my third year in college when I saved that little old lady who fell on the ice in front of a moose that had wandered into town? I threw snowballs and shrieked until it ambled away into the trees. Surely, if You’re the real deal You were there. God, please be real. Please help me now. Because I can’t see anything. I’m flopped on my belly atop a heap of corpses. That can’t be right. The dark is sticky. Warm, inanimate flesh yields beneath me. My pinky slips into someone’s dead staring eye. Eyelashes bat against my knuckle.

Zane kisses my cheek. I’d recognize his Rico Suave cologne anywhere, even here. He says, “Welcome and congratulations. You’re part of it. You’ll always be part of it. I’ll see you at the party. Guest of honor, Ed.”

The rest of the night is a blank. Or a hole. So, thanks for that, God. If you exist, which I figure you don’t. The cut in my finger doesn’t close for weeks. The hole in my soul remains the equivalent of a sucking chest wound.

II: Culling

Zane Tooms makes the CNN ticker three and a half years later.

Kind of a funny story. A terrific day until that point. I spend it shopping for vintage LPs at this fat cat record producer’s annual garage sale. Vinyl is my true addiction. Stronger and purer than my fondness for baby dykes, or even my love of a self-effacing bear with real taste in the arts. I spend weekends with my boyfriend Tony at his Malibu beach house. This summer my theme resounds courtesy of The Kinks: “Little Miss Queen of Darkness.” I don’t

really identify. Drag isn't my thing and any sadness in my eyes is liable to be incidental tearing from my extra lush lashes. Nope, I love the song because its lyrics are true poetry. Poetry is distinctly lacking in this modern world. Barbarians have sacked the music industry, despoiled Hollywood. Publishing is a joke with celebrity tell-alls and Dan Brown as the punchline.

I'm lamenting these facts while sprawled on the sofa in Tony's giant game room. The news hits as I'm raising a mojito to my lips. Hard to believe my eyes. I didn't believe them either, though, when the accusations of seventy counts of Rohypnol-facilitated rape first came down to the clack of a magistrate's gavel. Apparently that dark side of Zane's was worse than I thought. Theory goes that seventy is a conservative estimate—who knows how many victims he's left scattered across Europe.

Now Zane is dead. The DEA and Mexican police shot him a bajillion times in some fleabag hotel in Mexico City. I don't know how to feel. There's a tiny white scar on the underside of my middle finger. I look at it and wonder if he ever raped *me.* Doubtful. Despite all indications, evidence is he didn't swing for dudes. Like I said, I don't know how to feel.

"Ha! Hell yes! I told you they'd get that rat bastard!" Tony wanders in from the shower and does a sack dance in celebration. He played ball for the Forty-Niners. His gut is enormous. The old me, lily-fresh college grad, would've cared. The worn and worried me is more concerned with Tony's heart. He's a kindly soul, his celebration of Zane's demise notwithstanding. Tony heard the stories and paid for my therapy. He's earned the right to cry, "Ding-dong!" etcetera.

Oops.

The doorbell rings and it's Julie Five on the step. I almost swoon at the shock.

"So, we meet again." She's wearing sunglasses and a white sundress. Her skin is softer and pinker than I recall. Time has rejuvenated her or she's gotten on the E. Bathory program. A midnight-blue Mustang is parked in the drive with the top down. The hood symbol looks more like a particular malformed death's head than any mustang. Three and a half years might as well be three and a half days. She makes a moue of her lips. I don't offer

my cheek for the courtesy peck, no way. I'd rather let a tarantula sit on my face.

She crowds me backward. Her shadow crosses mine and my legs go weak and I collapse upon the rug where sunlight pools on nice days. This is California, so yes, the sunlight is doing that right now. She steps over my supine form and I get a peek at her goods, like it or not. Red panties to match her scary-long fingernails. The sun filtering through the fabric of the dress turns everything to crimson. She reaches into a demure handbag and produces the iron ring. Slides it onto the third finger of her left hand. She looms above me, smiling in a way I don't recognize from her repertoire. If evil and cruelty can mature the way wine does, then here you go. This goddamned cask of Amontillado's got cobwebs all over it.

"What's going on?" Tony arrives, half-naked and thundering. He quickly takes in the situation and gets right in her personal space. "Who the hell are you?"

I'm afraid he'll hit her, shatter her smirk with his mallet fist. I'm terrified he won't. Either way, it doesn't matter. I can't move, can't speak. My body is cold from the inside out.

"You're Anthony. Hello." She extends her hand.

He brushes her gesture aside. "And you're Julie. Yeah, I recognize you. Step, lady. You aren't welcome."

"C'mon, stud. Put her there." She smirks mischievously and reaches for him again. The light in the room dims because she's sucking it into her eyes. She snags his hand and clasps it tight with both of hers the way politicians do, the way a black widow fastens to her prey. Squeezes so hard that blood drips from their joined fingers. That's the end. Tony sways in place and she stands on tiptoes to whisper into his ear. It goes on for maybe ten seconds until she releases him and steps back.

"Oh, wow," he says. Tony usually talks loud enough to break your eardrums. This is a mousy little whisper. "I'm sorry. I didn't know." His face changes as he turns away. His skin tightens and his mouth and eyes stretch at the corners, but I only catch a glimpse. He shambles toward the living room, gone forever.

“Not with a bang but a whimper,” Julie Five says, quoting the only Eliot she’s likely memorized. Julie didn’t use her own brain to get through college. She relied upon cunning and nascent savagery. The light in the room drains away and she floats above me, a pale gemstone revolving against the void. She draws the dwindling heat from my bones and into her huge, luminous eyes.

I belatedly notice the feathered dart protruding from my breast. Steely J drifts from the unknowable depths, pistol in hand. He salutes me and drapes his arm around Julie Five’s waist.

I am very, very tired.

They wink, synchronized, and I wink out.

Vadim talks while he carries me in his arms, the Bride of Frankenstein.

“There are these worm things, or leech things, neither, but you get the picture, and they detach or are expelled from a central mass. These worms, or leeches, crawl inside you through whatever opening is available. The urethra and the anus are likely access ways. That’s what happened to the dinosaurs. It’s one theory. I think it works.”

“Put me down, man.” My voice is hoarse and my skull aches. My breast muscle hurts too. Whatever Steely J hit me with packs a nasty hangover.

We stand there, wherever there is. An abandoned hotel lobby? Lots of dust, boarded windows, and the light fixtures are fubar. Bright though, because sunlight streams through cracks and crevices. I ask the obvious and he shrugs. He too received a visit from Julie Five and a follow-up dart from Steely J. Like me, he came to in this place.

“Uh-oh.”

I follow Vadim’s gaze and see a thick man all in black standing on the mezzanine steps. His face is pale and freaky as shit. The flesh is so tight, his eyes stretch to slits, their corners near his temples. A machete dangles from his fist. Blood drips from the blade.

“Tony?” Right size, wrong face, except maybe it was the right face, I’d seen it changing at the casa …

“Tony isn’t Tony no more. That’s Mr. Flat Affect.” Vadim grips my arm. “Let’s book.”

We book. I try the obvious things—exterior door handles are locked and chained from the outside; the windows are barred. I glimpse a dry pool in the courtyard. The yard has gone Planet of the Apes. Grass run riot. The palm trees are dull yellow. Mort is spiked halfway up the bole of the biggest tree. He's covered in dried blood, but I recognize his voice when he calls for help, for god, for death. There are several more people nailed to trees. Harder to identify. I don't want to know.

Before long, I stop to catch my breath.

"This is about the ritual."

"Duh," Vadim says. "The goon is one of Zane's pets, or something like that."

"But why are they after us? We're part of the inner circle, right? Ground floor of the new order and all that jazz?" I hadn't taken it seriously, had only gone along because of the pressure. I hadn't swallowed ZT's apocalypse fantasies. Now, here I am trying to lawyer my way out of getting murdered.

"He lied. We're the blood in the blood pact."

"Pact with whom?"

He gives me a sad look for not paying attention during class.

Another Mr. Flat Affect saunters through a door and confronts us. He too wields a machete. However, he's clad in a white paper suit. The suit is streaked and grimy. It's a bad moment, but Savate! I expect great things from Vadim's size-eleven Doc Martens. Vadim yells, "Oh fuck!" and elaborately gathers himself like he's tossing a kaber and snaps this kind of slow-mo roundhouse kick that misses by a mile. Maybe a mile and a half. He lands on his ass. And it would be hilarious except I'm shitting my capris. Mr. Flat Affect doesn't hurry; I doubt he ever hurries. He raises the machete and splits my best friend's skull. Does him like the islanders do with coconuts, with a lazy overhand chop. *Kerthunk.* The killer pauses to savor the gurgling and spurting.

Doc Martens are peachy. I swear by Nikes. Canary yellow with Velcro, nobody's got time for laces. I put mine to their best use—slapping tile at a high rate.

III: The Bear Catacombs

I run through an archway and am back in Alaska in the Toombs family basement. The bear catacombs. It has to be a nightmare because I instantly recognize the late 90s. Sister, those were bad times for yours truly—nobody told me “it gets better,” they told me to sit down and keep my mouth shut.

A party is in progress—music on full blast, lights ablaze, half the kids from our high school graduating class doing the bump and grind. Zane lurks on the fringes, a loud, fat, glittery-eyed kid. His smile is sly. He’s exactly as I remember, only more so.

There my high school self is, on the edge, crushed against a skinny senior track star. My hair is dreadful in spiked hair and a lime mesh tank top, and Stu Whitlock flaunts a mullet. Merciful Jesus, I had no idea I had so much to apologize for.

The band grinds to a halt and the lead singer chugs from a bottle of whiskey. My youthful double disappears up the stairs. A few seconds later, the shrieks begin. That would be Dave Teague, naked and insane, busting a move for the front door. I remember the rest with unpleasant clarity—there’s a hot blond Ukrainian transfer student lying mangled and murdered in a bed on the top floor. Some lowlife snuffed her and tried for the daily double with Dave. The killer is in fact shambling after Dave into the night. In a few minutes, state troopers scrag the psycho killer on the access road. I also recall that someone mentions the psycho’s face is white with greasepaint, or he wears a mask, and shit, it hits me—Mr. Flat Affect has been with us since when.

Mind. Blown.

“La!” Julie Five steps from the crowd. Modern day Julie Five, fully envenomed, egg sac probably full to bursting. She was sort of a cute kid. Not anymore. She grins and tweaks my nose. Her fingers are icy. “You’re bleeding, sweetie.”

The blood is Vadim’s—I’ve come through so far without a scratch, and that’s ironic, because I’d bruise if somebody stuck a pea under my mattress. I’m speechless, unable to twitch, Julie Five seems to have that effect on my nervous system. Behind her, kids begin milling around the exposed section

of wall where the pipes and tree roots form a maw. There's some scuffling and I see my erstwhile date Stu Whitlock crawl inside. He's followed by that beefy guy who played linebacker the year we went to state. Then another, and another, wriggling like sperm to fit through the crack in the earth, burrowing their way to god knows where. Doesn't take long for the last pair of legs to disappear into the darkness and it's us chickens left behind in an empty basement.

Mr. Flat Affect emerges from the corner where the coats are piled. Sways in place, devilish gaze locked on me. He's a meat suit and whatever powers him came from the deep earth. I whimper.

"Don't be afraid," Julie Five says. "You made the cut. We wouldn't dream of harming a hair on your frosty little head. You're our final girl. I always hoped you would be." She takes my hand, leads me upstairs, and seats me in the parlor at a plain wooden table. The moon glows hard in the upper corner of a bay window. Its light seems to recede, shrinking to a dot as I watch. She removes a black moleskin notebook from her purse, opens it before me, and clicks the action on a ballpoint pen, places it beside the notebook. "Your memoir. It will be important someday, after everyone has forgotten how all this started. There's a fire safe in the den."

Two more Mr. Flat Affects have noiselessly appeared at her flanks. One in white, the other black. Their expressions are identically monstrous. She links arms with them and they glide into the shadows. "Good luck," she says from somewhere. Her voice echoes as if bouncing around a canyon. "Enjoy yourself."

I do as she says and write down what I know. I stash the notebook in the fire safe. Sun devours moon and the second decade of the twenty-first century absorbs the 1990s. The Tooms mansion decays around me. The table becomes stone and the stuffed moose head wilts unto a living death. I'm once again thirty-something and utterly fabulous despite the bags under my eyes, the tremor in my hand, and the caked-on gore.

Steely J, Julie Five, and Zane Tooms are long gone. The others remain as remains—Vadim, Morton, Candice, Clint, and Leo. Bloated, purple-black, in a pile near the hearth. Candice's shoe has fallen off.

Had the poison been in the ring or the liquor? The ring is how I bet. My crazy-person epistle isn't going to do me any favors in a court of law. Story like mine is a one-way trip to the booby hatch. What will happen to me when the authorities make the scene? That gets an answer when the pair of troopers roll up to investigate after the anonymous call. They are none too reassured by my appearance and wild story. Two seconds after they nearly trip over the pile of corpses, I'm staring down the barrels of automatic pistols.

My finger bleeds from a wound that will never close. I make a fist without a thought as I mumble apologies for being here in this house of horrors, wrong place, wrong time—oh, so most def the wrong time. I needn't bother. The tearing pain in my hand lends an edge to my voice. My breath steams, a dark cone, and both troopers shudder in unison. Their guns clatter on the floor. Color drains from those well-fed faces, skin snaps tight and their eyes, their mouths, shiver and stretch. The transformation requires mere seconds. Their peculiar, *click-clicking* thoughts scritch and buzz inside my own psychic killing jar. They are mine, like it or not.

I *do* like it, though. A bunch.

Mist covers the world below this lonely hilltop. It's bitter cold and I'm barely dressed, yet it doesn't touch me. Nothing can. I am Bela Lugosi's most famous character reborn and reinterpreted. The Tooms estate is my mansion on the moor, my gothic castle. Time has slipped and I wonder if Tony is still out there in Malibu, waiting to meet me and fall in love. Do I care? Must I?

Who originally said some men want to watch the world burn? Whomever, he meant assholes like Zane and Julie. They chose me, corrupted me, and invested in me some profane force. Its trickle charge impresses my brain with visions of debauched revelry, of global massacre, fire, and slavery. Do my minor part to spread mayhem and terror and a few years down the road I can be on the ground floor of a magnificent dystopian clique. I can be a lord of darkness with minions and everything.

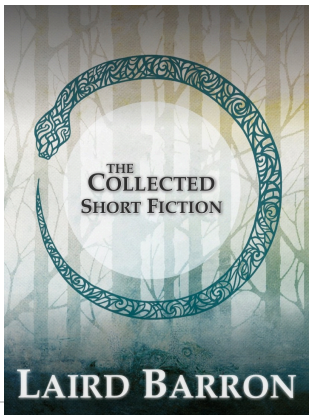
What shall I do with such incalculable power?

"Fix me a cosmopolitan," I say to ex-trooper, ex-human, Numero Uno. He does and it's passable.

There are numerous doors inside the Tooms mansion, to say nothing of the crack that splinters through bedrock and who knows where from there. I could wreak havoc in the name of diabolical progress. Or I could flap my arms and fly to Hollywood, whisper in the right ears and watch a sea change transform the industry. Or I could return to my senior year and seize Stu Whitaker by more than the hip, tell Father dearest to get bent with a martini in one hand and a smoldering joint in the other.

Decisions, decisions, you know?

(Little Miss) Queen of Darkness



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I: Initiation

I write this: *The cops don't know what really happened in Eagle Talon. Lies, all lies. Ask Jessica, if I ever see her again.* This isn't about Eagle Talon, however. I've never even been. No sir, Bob, if it's about anything, it's about that debutant ball Zane throws in his basement at the tail end of high school, 1998. The unfinished basement with the raw earth and a tunnel that smells of mildew and dankness. The tunnel is maybe three by three and is actually a cleft in the rock of the hill upon which this house rests.

I can't forget that tunnel. It drills through my mind.

Yeah, Shit Creek describes an imperfect circle right back to the bad old days. Oh, the party is rad, though: heavy metal, booze, drugs, psychedelic lights. The kids slam-dancing. Me with my hand on Stu Whitlock's hip the whole time and nobody the wiser. Then that damned hick brat Dave Teague racing overhead, naked and covered in blood (so the legend goes), screaming his head off. Ruins everything…

I also write: *People call it this or that, but our club doesn't have a name. It didn't originate in Alaska. It was around before Alaska. We don't suckle at the breast of a god, it suckles at ours.* Unfortunately, devoid of context, that stuff reads like the Unabomber's doodles.

Next, I make a list. Were I to title it, the title would be "People Who Died," like the song. Such an everyman tune because everybody can relate, right? The partial list is scribbled in a black moleskin notebook. I've left bloody fingerprints on the pages. Many of the names are illegible from the smears,

or redaction with a magic marker. Names changed to protect the guilty. Four remain intact in truth and form. Hell if I know whether that's significant or not.

Zane Tooms & Julie Vellum: They could've been the power couple from the lowest circle of Hell. Alas, Zane already had a loyalist and Julie's not the kind to need any. These are your villains. Nuff said.

Steely J: Tall enough to play pro basketball. He's Zane's major domo. The Renfield to Zane's Dracula. Loyal through thick and thin—and I'm not kidding, I literally mean that. We called Zane "Fat Boy Tooms" until his folks croaked and he started in with the horse de-wormer and got slenderized. Steely J stuck with him down the line. Steely is what you might call inscrutable. Looks nice, dresses nice, and plays nice, if a teensy bit of a cold fish. His features lag behind whatever message his brain is sending. Somebody behind the curtain throws a switch and he smiles. Or, he smiles and picks up a claw hammer and comes for you. The Sandburg poem about fog creeping on little cat feet? That's Steely J. Except six-six with a hammer.

Vadim: My buddy Vadim often brags that he's an expert in Savate. He paid two hundred dollars for a six-week course at a strip mall. I let him drag me in once to meet the instructor (mainly I wanted to ogle some studly hotties kicking and stretching, but whatev) and the dude had a bunch of diplomas, certificates, and autographed photos of macho celebrities I didn't care to recognize. The French version of hi-ya for an hour. Bo-oring.

The strip mall closed shop when the economy cratered in '09. Not before Vadim got what he needed, however. He asserts that Savate is the elite of the elite fighting arts, natch. I don't know my foot from my elbow when it comes to violence. I'm a lover, always have been. That's why I keep the numbers of a few bigger, tougher friends in my mental rolodex.

Vadim talks lots of shit every time we go clubbing and the fraternity bros start hitting on me, which they totally do. I clutch his sleeve and say, "Whoa, there stud. They're just being friendly. Get mama another margarita, kay?" Vadim shoots the bros a venomous parting glare and then toddles off to fetch my drink. His thighs bulge his cargo pants so that he really does toddle. I think of it as having my own Siberian tiger on a leash,

except with pouty, pouty lips, and six-pack abs! Nice while it lasted. He's dead too.

End of list.

Go back, not the whole way, not to high school. Three and a half years is far enough. We have gathered, dearly beloved. Gathered to sign on the dotted line and change the course of our stars forever. What a load of crap. *I'm* motivated by fascination, boredom, skepticism. Some of the others are buggy-eyed true believers. Have at it, morons.

The sun is bleeding out all over the Chugach Mountains. An inlet, ice-toothed and serpentine, lies below us somewhere, wrapped by mist that's freezing into black pearl. I'm not captivated by the austere beauty of the far north as seen through frosty picture windows. My feet are cold and I'm bored. I'm an L.A. girl trapped inside an L.A. boy. This arctic weather is for the birds.

Julie Five says to me, "Oh, Ed, quit sulking. You detest it so much, why'd you come? Nut up or shut up." She finishes me off with a sweet as pie smile. I beam one right back. Anybody more than arms-length away might get the impression we're peaches and cream. Big sister, little brother at worst. Then again, it's an intimate gathering of former classmates. Most of the others know how it is with us because it's been this way with us since junior high. Her nickname is JV, but I call her Julie Five. Our mutual acquaintance, the lamentably absent Jessica M, coined that bit of mockery. Sure, we're supposed to pity Julie Five for cowering in a closet while her lover got noisily disemboweled by the Eagle Talon Ripper in the winter of 2012, but her sob story doesn't move me—"victim-of-unspeakable-tragedy" is scraping the bottom of the barrel on a white trash reality show. Her sneaky path to fifteen minutes of fame and she didn't even *try* to stop the murdering bastard. Oh, dear heavens, no—she left that chore to her archrival, Jessica M, the girl who got the cover of *Black Belt Magazine* and interviews with every cable news show in existence. Good for Jess. Screw Julie Five. She's cowardly, treacherous, and mean. She like totally vacillates between vocal fry and ending every sentence on a rising note.

Basically the darkest valley girl in the history of valley girls. I'd feed her a cup of lye if I had some.

Our host, Zane Tooms, stares at the sunset the way a man with an appointment compulsively checks his watch. He's dressed in a white shirt and black pants. No shoes. He never wears shoes at home. His shirt is unbuttoned two notches. A metallic chain gleams from the opening. I've seen the pendant when Zane had his shirt off—a smallish lump of vaguely horrid metal, or bone. Its color shifts, the film of a lizard's eye rolling aside. He folds his napkin, rises from his seat (throne) at the head of the table, and walks further into the decrepit mansion.

The house juts from a knoll with an impressive view of tidal flats and occasionally the water. The knoll was a bear den until hunters exterminated the bears and poured concrete back in when-the-hell-ever. Exactly the kind of place natives would say, "Don't build here! Bad medicine!" White Man doesn't give a shit about any of that and here we are. Even so, the Tooms residence lacks the sinister gravitas of a classic, gothic haunted castle. Made over once too often, the latest reconstructive surgery has rendered it a queasy amalgam of art deco and '60s kitsch. His home might have been cozy in its heyday. He let it go to seed after the senior Toomses shuffled into the next life. He travels and can't be bothered with upkeep. I've told him he needs a decorator because the ambiance sucks. Frontier chic it is not. Swear to God he doesn't even live here, it's so borderline derelict. If Zane confessed he only showed up to unlock the joint and turn on the lights half an hour before his guests arrived, I wouldn't be shocked.

The basement is carved into the den itself and mostly unfinished. Lots of exposed beams, pipes, and dirt. I shudder to think. Tunnels bore past the glow of any lamp. Can't say I'm impressed with the remote location or the bear catacombs. Way too rustic for this girl. What does impress me is Zane himself. These days, after slimming his chubby cheeks and beer gut, he's drop dead gorgeous. A walking, talking Ken Doll; brunette model. He oozes primal charisma. Night and day from the acne-riddled, blimpo Zane that we knew and abhorred as kids. I'd kill to learn his secret and that's part of why I RSVP'd yes on the invitation last month; why I ditched everything I had cooking in Cali and came like a dog to her master's whistle.

Steely J gives us a significant nod. We guests push away from half-empty plates and migrate into the parlor, wine coolers and rum and cokes in hand. I loathe the parlor. It's cold and dank, the books are moldy, and the stuffed moose head that presides here has gone blind with rot. The notion of accidentally brushing against something icky gives me the shivers.

Zane unlocks a cabinet and sets a jewelry box upon the big circular granite table we're seated around. The table is slightly concave. Several parallel grooves radiate from the edge to a depression in the center. As for the jewelry case, it is an unpleasant box with the lacquer stripped. The wood is scored and blanched by patterns of fungal decay. An eighteenth-century caravel's lost antique dredged from the muck at the bottom of Cook Inlet in 1979, or so my peeps testify. Inside the box, a ring nests in crushed velvet. An indelicate description for those playing at home—its color is similar to a blood clot glistening against tissue paper. He plucks the ring and casually passes it to Morton, bing, bang, bong. No formalities whatsoever.

"Damn, it's heavy," Morton says. Morton always sounds bemused or surprised.

"Don't drop it," Julie Five says. She's cool and eager. She gave Morton a hummer last August while we were all on a tour bus at Denali State Park. They speak to each other with barely restrained antipathy. "Drop it, and it's ten demerits." Gawd, I hate her smug, bitchy tone. I hate that Morton accepted her blowjob and turned me down flat. Heel.

"By the way, the table isn't granite," Zane says as if he's peeked into my brain. His gaze is cruel. "Another rock entirely. There are chains of sea caves in the Aleutians. This table is carved from the bedrock of those caves. Men died acquiring this on my behalf." He looks at Morton. "Okay, Mort. Time to get bitten." He is indulgent, yet commanding. Two decades in Europe, and farther abroad, will do that to a guy, I suppose. Julie Five says Zane spent months lost in a desert and went barking mad. Eating-his-own-shoelaces fucked in the head. Wouldn't guess it to feast your eyes upon him, or maybe you would. The corners of his eyes twitch if you catch it at the right moment.

Morton makes a show of examining the ring, as if a middle manager role at an office supply store qualifies him to appraise jewelry. He's enjoying the

spotlight. “Is this the Ouroboros?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Zane’s sneer almost spoils the plastic charm of his perma-smile. I’ve long assumed his genial urbanity is a façade for darker impulses. Doesn’t bother me. Everybody has got another side. It’s exciting.

“If there were a *real* Dracula Ring, this would be the one,” Julie Five says. “Lugosi’s was pretty. Fake. Fake. Fake.” She rocks, barely suppressed. Her face is so very animated. I’ve seen that expression. It’s the wide-eyed, lips slightly parted expression women at boxing matches wear. I’m sure the rich hoes in Rome did it the same when they attended the gladiatorial games.

The ring is formed of thick, intertwined strands of corroded iron. There’s a jagged gap opposite the shank. Whether from damage or by design, I haven’t a clue. The shank is set with the aforementioned gory gemstone that also, if you squint, resembles a death’s head in the way a thundercloud might resemble the skull of an angry god. The stone fitfully glints with the light from the table lamp. Almost a twin to the pendant hanging from Zane’s neck.

“I thought it’d be a thumb prick.” Morton slips the ring onto his finger.

“Ha ha, you said prick.” I laugh, but not really. No, not really.

“Dude,” Vadim says with ample foreboding. “This shit is how you get sepsis or peritonitis or something.”

“Quiet, punk, you’re next.” Julie Five grins at him. I think of a northern pike opening its needle-fanged jaws to slurp down a hook.

Zane raises his eyebrow. “A dribble of claret for the cause seems reasonable. The price for betrayal is a blood eagle. JV’s idea. Be warned.”

“What’s a blood eagle?” I say.

“You don’t want one,” Vadim says.

Steely J excuses himself. He steps through a panel near a bookcase and that’s the last I see of him. I think it’s the very last time *anybody* sees him for a few years. Candice, his latest girlfriend, remains at the table with an expression of abandonment. She’s had too many wine coolers.

Neither Clint nor Leo speak. They’re nervous, I can tell. Leo is a bit green around the gills. Real hard cases. Both of them agitated and wheedled to be included, and now their knees are knocking. And why are they spooked?

The ceremony is bullshit. High school melodrama. This is supposed to be mock serious, like fucking about with Ouija boards and séances or homoerotic fraternity paddling rituals.

"Seven is a good number," Zane says. He's not counting himself, obviously. He's playing Satan. "Seven were the apprentices in the Devil's Grotto."

"Power number, baby," Julie Five says, Ed McMahon to his Johnny Carson.

We all stare at one another. Similar to gazing into a mirror—after a while, everybody is as plastic as Zane. I poke Morton in the ribs. Somebody has to be the first to leap and he's it. He makes a fist. Blood begins to flow. The blind moose watches as we each take our turn.

God, do You remember my third year in college when I saved that little old lady who fell on the ice in front of a moose that had wandered into town? I threw snowballs and shrieked until it ambled away into the trees. Surely, if You're the real deal You were there. God, please be real. Please help me now. Because I can't see anything. I'm flopped on my belly atop a heap of corpses. That can't be right. The dark is sticky. Warm, inanimate flesh yields beneath me. My pinky slips into someone's dead-staring eyeball. Eyelashes bat against my knuckle.

Zane kisses my cheek. I'd recognize his Rico Suave cologne anywhere, even here. He says, "Welcome and congratulations. You're part of it. You'll always be part of it. I'll see you at the party. Guest of honor, Ed."

The rest of the night is a blank. Or a hole. So, thanks for that, God. If you exist, which I figure you don't. The cut in my finger doesn't close for weeks. The hole in my soul remains the equivalent of a sucking chest wound.

II: Culling

Zane Tooms makes the CNN ticker three and a half years later.

Kind of a funny story. A terrific day until that point. I spend it shopping for vintage LPs at this fat cat record producer's annual garage sale. Vinyl is my true addiction. Stronger and purer than my fondness for baby dykes, or even my love of a self-effacing bear with real taste in the arts. I spend weekends with my boyfriend Tony at his Malibu beach house. This summer my theme resounds courtesy of The Kinks: "Little Miss Queen of Darkness." I don't really identify. Drag isn't my thing and any sadness in my eyes is liable to be incidental tearing from my extra lush lashes. Nope, I love the song because its lyrics are true poetry. Poetry is distinctly lacking in this modern world. Barbarians have sacked the music industry, despoiled Hollywood. Publishing is a joke with celebrity tell-alls and Dan Brown as the punchline.

I'm lamenting these facts while sprawled on the sofa in Tony's giant game room. The news hits as I'm raising a mojito to my lips. Hard to believe my eyes. I didn't believe them either, though, when the accusations of seventy counts of Rohypnol-facilitated rape first came down to the clack of a magistrate's gavel. Apparently that dark side of Zane's was worse than I thought. Theory goes that seventy is a conservative estimate—who knows how many victims he's left scattered across Europe.

Now Zane is dead. The DEA and Mexican police shot him a bajillion times in some fleabag hotel in Mexico City. I don't know how to feel. There's a tiny white scar on the underside of my middle finger. I look at it and wonder if he ever raped *me*. Doubtful. Despite all indications, evidence is he didn't swing for dudes. Like I said, I don't know how to feel.

"Ha! Hell yes! I told you they'd get that rat bastard!" Tony wanders in from the shower and does a sack dance in celebration. He played ball for the Forty-Niners. His gut is enormous. The old me, lily-fresh college grad, would've cared. The worn and worried me is more concerned with Tony's heart. He's a kindly soul, his celebration of Zane's demise notwithstanding. Tony heard the stories and paid for my therapy. He's earned the right to cry, "Ding-dong!" et cetera.

Oops.

The doorbell rings and it's Julie Five on the step. I almost swoon at the shock.

“So, we meet again.” She’s wearing sunglasses and a white sundress. Her skin is softer and pinker than I recall. Time has rejuvenated her or she’s gotten on the E. Bathory program. A midnight-blue Mustang is parked in the drive with the top down. The hood symbol looks more like a particular malformed death’s head than any mustang. Three and a half years might as well be three and a half days. She moues in preparation for a kiss. I don’t offer my cheek for the courtesy peck, no way. I’d rather let a tarantula sit on my face.

She crowds me backward. Her shadow crosses mine and my legs go weak and I collapse upon the rug where sunlight pools on nice days. This is California, so yes, the sunlight is doing that right now. She steps over my supine form and I get a peek at her goods, like it or not. Red panties to match her scary-long fingernails. The sun filtering through the fabric of the dress turns everything to crimson. She reaches into a demure handbag and produces the iron ring. Slides it onto the third finger of her left hand. She looms above me, smiling in a way I don’t recognize from her repertoire. If evil and cruelty can mature the way wine does, then here you go. This goddamned cask of Amontillado’s got cobwebs all over it.

“What’s going on?” Tony arrives, half-naked and thundering. He quickly takes in the situation and gets right in her personal space. “Who the hell are you?”

I’m afraid he’ll hit her, shatter her smirk with his mallet fist. I’m terrified he won’t. Either way, it doesn’t matter. I can’t move, can’t speak. My body is cold from the inside out.

“You’re Anthony. Hello.” She extends her hand.

He brushes her gesture aside. “And you’re Julie. Yeah, I recognize you. Step, lady. You aren’t welcome.”

“C’mon, stud. Put her there.” She smirks mischievously and reaches for him again. The light in the room dims because she’s sucking it into her eyes. She snags his hand and clasps it tight with both of hers the way politicians do, the way a black widow fastens to her prey. Squeezes so hard that blood drips from their joined fingers. That’s the end. Tony sways in place and she stands on tiptoes to whisper into his ear. It goes on for maybe ten seconds until she releases him and steps back.

“Oh, wow,” he says. Tony usually talks loud enough to break your eardrums. This is a mousy little whisper. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” His face changes as he turns away. His skin tightens and his mouth and eyes stretch at the corners, but I only catch a glimpse. He shambles toward the living room, gone forever.

“Not with a bang but a whimper,” Julie Five says, quoting the only Eliot she’s likely memorized. Julie didn’t use her own brain to get through college. She relied upon cunning and nascent savagery. The light in the room drains away and she floats above me, a pale gemstone revolving against the void. She draws the dwindling heat from my bones and into her huge, luminous eyes.

I belatedly notice the feathered dart protruding from my breast. Steely J drifts from the unknowable depths, pistol in hand. He salutes me and drapes his arm around Julie Five’s waist.

I am very, very tired.

They wink, synchronized, and I wink out.

Vadim talks while he carries me in his arms, the Bride of Frankenstein.

“There are these worm things, or leech things, neither, but you get the picture, and they detach or get expelled from a central mass. These worms, or leeches, crawl inside you through whatever opening is available. The urethra and the anus are likely access ways. That’s what happened to the dinosaurs. It’s one theory. I think it works.”

“Put me down, man.” My voice is hoarse and my skull aches. My breast muscle hurts too. Whatever Steely J hit me with packs a nasty hangover.

We stand there, wherever there is. An abandoned hotel lobby? Lots of dust, boarded windows, and the light fixtures are fubar. Bright though, because sunlight streams through cracks and crevices. I ask the obvious and he shrugs. He too received a visit from Julie Five and a follow-up dart from Steely J. Like me, he came to in this place.

“Uh-oh.”

I follow Vadim's gaze and see a thick man all in black standing on the mezzanine steps. His face is pale and freaky as shit. The flesh is so tight, his eyes stretch to slits, their corners near his temples. A machete dangles from his fist. Blood drips from the blade.

"Tony?" Right size, wrong face; except maybe it was the right face, I'd seen it changing at the casa…

"Tony isn't Tony no more. That's Mr. Flat Affect." Vadim grips my arm. "Let's book."

We book. I try the obvious things—exterior door handles are locked and chained from the outside; the windows are barred. I glimpse a dry pool in the courtyard. The yard has gone Planet of the Apes. Grass run riot. The palm trees are dull yellow. Mort is spiked halfway up the bole of the biggest tree. He's covered in dried blood, but I recognize his voice when he calls for help, for god, for death. There are several more people nailed to trees. Harder to identify. I don't want to know.

Before long, I stop to catch my breath.

"This is about the ritual."

"Duh," Vadim says. "The goon is one of Zane's pets, or something like that."

"But why are they after us? We're part of the inner circle, right? Ground floor of the new order and all that jazz?" I hadn't taken it seriously, had only gone along because of the pressure. I hadn't swallowed ZT's apocalypse fantasies. Now, here I am trying to lawyer my way out of getting murdered.

"He lied. We're the blood in the blood pact."

"Pact with whom?"

He gives me a sad look for not paying attention during class.

Another Mr. Flat Affect saunters through a door and confronts us. He too wields a machete. However, he's clad in a white paper suit. The suit is streaked and grimy. It's a bad moment, but Savate! I expect great things from Vadim's size 11 Doc Martens. Vadim yells, "Oh fuck!" and elaborately gathers himself like he's tossing a kaber and snaps this kind of slow-mo roundhouse kick that misses by a mile. Maybe a mile and a half. He lands

on his ass. And it would be hilarious except I'm shitting my capris. Mr. Flat Affect doesn't hurry; I doubt he ever hurries. He raises the machete and splits my best friend's skull. Does him like the islanders do with coconuts, with a lazy overhand chop. The killer pauses to savor the gurgling and spurting.

Doc Martens are peachy. *I* swear by Nikes. Canary yellow with Velcro, nobody's got time for laces. I put mine to their best use—slapping tile at a high rate.

III: The Bear Catacombs

I run through an archway and am back in Alaska in the Tooms family basement. The bear catacombs. It has to be a nightmare because I instantly recognize the late 90s. Sister, those were bad times for yours truly—nobody told me "it gets better," they told me to sit down and keep my mouth shut.

A party is in progress—music on full blast, lights ablaze, half the kids from our high school graduating class doing the bump and grind. Zane lurks on the fringes, a loud, fat, glittery-eyed kid. His smile is sly. He's exactly as I remember, only more so.

There my high school self is, on the edge, crushed against a skinny senior track star. I look dreadful: spiked hair and a lime mesh tank top. Stu Whitlock flaunts a mullet. Merciful Jesus, I had no idea I had so much to apologize for.

The band grinds to a halt and the lead singer chugs from a bottle of whiskey. My youthful double disappears up the stairs. A few seconds later, the shrieks begin. That would be Dave Teague, naked and insane, busting a move for the front door. I remember the rest with unpleasant clarity—there's a hot blonde Ukrainian transfer student lying mangled and murdered in a bed on the top floor. Some lowlife snuffed her and tried for the daily double with Dave. The killer is in fact shambling after Dave into the night. In a few minutes, state troopers scrag the psycho killer on the access road. I also recall that someone mentions the psycho's face is white with greasepaint, or he wears a mask, and shit, it hits me—Mr. Flat Affect has been with us since when.

Mind. Blown.

“La!” Julie Five steps from the crowd. Modern day Julie Five, fully envenomed, egg sac probably full to bursting. She was sort of a cute kid. Not anymore. She grins and tweaks my nose. Her fingers are icy. “You’re bleeding, sweetie.”

The blood is Vadim’s—I’ve come through so far without a scratch, and that’s ironic, because I’d bruise if somebody stuck a pea under my mattress. I’m speechless, unable to twitch; Julie Five seems to have that effect on my nervous system. Behind her, kids begin milling around the exposed section of wall where the pipes and tree roots form a maw. There’s some scuffling and I see my erstwhile date Stu Whitlock crawl inside. He’s followed by that beefy guy who played linebacker the year we went to state. Then another, and another, wriggling like sperm to fit through the crack in the earth, burrowing their way to God knows where. Doesn’t take long for the last pair of legs to disappear into the darkness and it’s us chickens left behind in an empty basement.

Mr. Flat Affect emerges from the corner where the coats are piled. Sways in place, devilish gaze locked on me. He’s a meat suit and whatever powers him came from the deep earth. I whimper.

“Don’t be afraid,” Julie Five says. “You made the cut. We wouldn’t dream of harming a hair on your frosty little head. You’re our final girl. I always hoped you would be.” She takes my hand, leads me upstairs, and seats me in the parlor at a plain wooden table. The moon glows hard in the upper corner of a bay window. Its light seems to recede, shrinking to a dot as I watch. She removes a black moleskin notebook from her purse, opens it before me, and clicks the action on a ballpoint pen, places it beside the notebook. “Your memoir. It will be important someday, after everyone has forgotten how all this started. There’s a fire safe in the den.”

Two more Mr. Flat Affects have noiselessly appeared at her flanks. One in white, the other black. Their expressions are identically monstrous. She links arms with them and they glide into the shadows. “Good luck,” she says from somewhere. Her voice echoes as if bouncing around a canyon. “Enjoy yourself.”

I do as she says and write down what I know. I stash the notebook in the fire safe. Sun devours moon and the second decade of the twenty-first

century absorbs the 1990s. The Tooms mansion decays around me. The table becomes stone and the stuffed moose head wilts unto a living death. I'm once again thirty-something and utterly fabulous despite the bags under my eyes, the tremor in my hand, and the caked-on gore.

Steely J, Julie Five, and Zane Tooms are long gone. The others remain as remains—Vadim, Morton, Candice, Clint, and Leo. Bloated, purple-black, in a pile near the hearth. Candice's shoe has fallen off.

Had the poison been in the ring or the liquor? The ring is how I bet. My crazy-person epistle isn't going to do me any favors in a court of law. Story like mine is a one-way trip to the booby hatch. What will happen to me when the authorities make the scene? The question gets an answer when the pair of troopers roll up to investigate after the anonymous call. They are none too reassured by my appearance and wild story. Two seconds after they nearly trip over the pile of corpses, I'm staring down the barrels of automatic pistols.

My finger bleeds from a wound that will never close. I make a fist without a thought as I mumble apologies for being here in this house of horrors, wrong place, wrong time—oh, so most def the wrong time. I needn't bother. The tearing pain in my hand lends an edge to my voice. My breath steams, a dark cone, and both troopers shudder in unison. Their guns clatter on the floor. Color drains from those well-fed faces, skin snaps tight and their eyes, their mouths, shiver and stretch. The transformation requires mere seconds. Their peculiar, *click-clicking* thoughts scratch and buzz inside my own psychic killing jar. They are mine, like it or not.

I *do* like it, though. A bunch.

Mist covers the world below this lonely hilltop. It's bitter cold and I'm barely dressed, yet it doesn't touch me. Nothing can. I am Bela Lugosi's most famous character reborn and reinterpreted. The Tooms estate is my mansion on the moor, my gothic castle. Time has slipped and I wonder if Tony is still out there in Malibu, waiting to meet me and fall in love. Do I care? Must I?

Who originally said some men want to watch the world burn? Whomever, he meant assholes like Zane and Julie. They chose me, corrupted me, and invested in me some profane force. Its trickle charge impresses my brain

with visions of debauched revelry, of global massacre, fire, and slavery. Do my minor part to spread mayhem and terror and a few years down the road I can be on the ground floor of a magnificent dystopian clique. I can be a lord of darkness with minions and everything.

What shall I do with such incalculable power?

“Fix me a cosmopolitan,” I say to the ex-trooper, ex-human, on my right. He does and it’s passable.

There are numerous doors inside the Tooms mansion, to say nothing of the crack that splinters through bedrock and who knows where from there. I could wreak havoc in the name of diabolical progress. Or I could flap my arms and fly to Hollywood, whisper in the right ears and watch a sea change transform the industry. Or I could return to my senior year and seize Stu Whitaker by more than the hip, tell Father dearest to get bent with a martini in one hand and a smoldering joint in the other.

Decisions, decisions, you know?

Ears Prick Up

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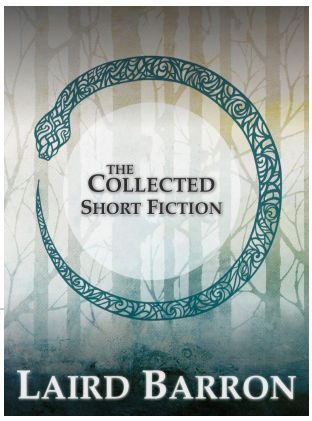

1

My kind is swift to chase, swift to battle. My imperfect memory is long with longing for the fight. Gray and arthritic in the twilight of retirement from valorous service to the Empire, my hackles still bunch at the clink of metal on metal. My yawn is an expression of doom sublimated. I dream of chasing elk across the plains of my ancient ancestors. I dream of blizzards and ice fields that merge with the bitter stars. In my dreams, I always die.

2

I traveled far from home in my youth. Dad and I slugged it out with a whole platoon of black hats one night as we strolled across the tundra of the Utter North. Military commandos hired to assassinate us; every man and dog marked with the mark of a secret gang, scents masked in case of failure. Poor, stupid fools. Probably sent by General Aniochles who figured Dad was gunning for his job. Bet my bottom chew toy the sonofabitch made the call. He gave Dad dagger eyes whenever they chatted at court. Bastard smelled guilty to me and that's what I knew. Well, I knew right.

I wasn't a pup then. I wasn't approaching my warranty date, either. My eyes glowed red with atomic radiation. My fangs gleamed in a grin that would have made a *T. rex* flinch, appropriately enough, because they named me, my whole series, after the terrible king extinct these many eons but unforgotten. Dad papered the walls of my kennel with color photos of dinos and wolves and exploding missiles to give me the right idea about how I should behave when he cried, "Sic 'em, Rex!"

Dad let slip the leash and I sicced, oh boy. The happiest of growls is the snarl of a locked jaw.

Bullets cracked and fire flashed all around us, while I lunged to and fro, hip deep in blood and mud the way dearly departed Kennel Master Callys and his best dog, Shotsum-Loathsum, taught me at the war academy. Shotsum-Loathsum was one of a kind, the failed Cerberus series, and they never again made his equal. He had two heads, one more vicious than the other! Might've been the meanest mutt to ever prowl the yard. Gave me this beauty scar on my muzzle, and I thank him.

I belched hellfire and howled sonic death. With each snap I sheared an armored arm here, a leg there. Those days were my destroying angel days. I could tear the tread from a tank and whip you with it. Fear pumped acid through my blood and accelerated my reactions. Fear tasted like raw meat; made me drool. Fear made me greater than my design that had attempted to render me fearless. That's why they canceled my line too. Hard to control a thinking dog.

I leaped in front of Dad as somebody opened up on him with an antipersonnel weapon and got shot a whole bunch for my troubles. The impact knocked me flat and splintered a stand of trees into kindling.

They shouldn't have done. Dad cursed his worst. He powered the prototype off-market rockets on his exoskeleton and gave an eye for an eye, lit a mushroom cloud where we struggled. Could have spotted us from orbit. In the end we killed the bastards and collapsed upon that slagged hunk of arctic plain, half done in ourselves. I groaned, fur shredded, titanium plates pierced and leaking the good stuff almost too fast for my cloud of nanobots to plug. Go little nanobots! My tongue lolled and I whimpered.

Dad patted my head. "Live it up, Rex. Once all the bad guys are dead, they'll retire us to the Happy Hunting Grounds."

Vexes me to this day that I don't know about the Happy Grounds. The pertinent entry seems to have been purged from my data banks.

3

Revisit this twenty or so years down the line. I'm a grizzled veteran. The powers that be have phased out the Rex Series. Dad must truly be sentimental because he keeps me around despite an abundance of options. My joints ache, my servos grind louder. I hope nobody notices.

The train sprawls in the long grass, a ravel of silver below this bare hill. A stutter of pops and flashes and the tyrant is dead. I should be down there, jaws agape, eyes flashing fire, my howl obliterating the courage of the enemy. Instead I crouch at my master's heel and growl in malice. Younger men and younger dogs do the dirty work.

Dad has killed the Emperor with a word. Long live the Emperor.

Dad's men approach, mud yet green on their faces, and report that this is so. They are good soldiers. He picked them carefully, as a farmer picks the best fruit from his orchard. They present him with a basket containing the tyrant's head—a basket of white birch in the ancient samurai custom. There are no longer samurai, but we do not forget.

Dad's men report that the tyrant's wife is also dead; the young, beautiful one who refused to part from him when the palace fell and his people lit great fires and shouted for his blood. Dad's men report how they have killed the tyrant's children, even the one who hid cleverly below the floorboards. They are good men, thorough men. He is pleased. I see it in the relaxing of his shoulders, smell it in his scent. I smell sadness too—he and the Emperor were pack, once.

Our new Emperor Trajan is jubilant. He commends our valor when Dad calls on the red phone to explain that the garden has been weeded. The new Emperor asks Dad to fetch the tyrant's banner to Prime. Trajan will spread it before the door of his toilet. There will be celebrations; we are invited. I will receive a medal of valor and a juicy ox bone. I have a cabinet of medals. I am the most decorated canine soldier in the history of the Empire.

Even as they speak on the red phone it rains, and through the rain I watch the tyrant's banner curl with flames. No matter. Dad knows of a three-fingered tailor in New Naples who will make us another.

4

Mom is happy when we finally return to our home by the white cliffs. She feeds Dad grapes from the vineyard and cheese from the goat. She bathes him from a ceremonial basin. They retire behind a bamboo screen to mate.

In the morning I water the big tree near the main gate and rest there for a while. The ocean is off to my left, dull beneath the cliffs and patterned with hungry birds. The tree is to my right, like me a piece of old metal—scarred and stained, white-puckered grooves radiating from the axis of its foundation. Such low, dark trees dot the ragged coast, but I am informed they do not spring native from this dirt. I wonder if they remember their birthgrounds by some impulse caught in the plexus of heartwood and cambial glue. When the winds rush off the water my tree seems to nod at the sky. It murmurs.

Marcello arrives in his glider when the sun grows fat. My tail wags with a crazy mind of its own. Marcello is black as pitch and always smells of violence, which I adore. His eyes are rivets in a cold bulk. Of all loyal hounds in Dad's stable, he is dominant. Oh, I could rend him, if growl came to snap, for I am Rex, greatest of my kind. Nonetheless, what a battle that would be!

My brains are superior to most canines. Nonetheless, the primitive beast within me isn't much for long-term planning. *His* stratagems are Dad's long knives. Marcy (Dad calls him that when it's just the boys) is a ruthless man. This is his chief virtue, in my humble opinion—current events call for ruthlessness. It is the time of dog-eat-dog.

They recline near the scarred tree and discuss the situation in Prime. The ocean is smooth today and Prime is an invisible place where people from books compete for favors. These folk caper at court—clowns, buffoons, trained seals in bright clothes.

Dad, too, competed once. Oh yes.

The old Emperor loved him well. The previous ministers were less charmed by Dad's heroics in the war against the barbarians. General Aniochles, Dad's bitterest rival, had openly warned the old Emperor about the dangers of popular war heroes with the keys to the Legion. Aniochles was a foreigner—some speculate that barbarian water tainted his veins, and so the old Emperor chose to turn a deaf ear. Later, Aniochles got torn apart by the mob which stormed the palace during the glorious revolution. I wish we had found his body so I could have pissed upon it.

Marcello says that Prime is a safer place now. The partisans of the old Emperor have been rooted out and shriven. More importantly, the partisans of the old General have been dealt their rewards. During the plans for the Grand Transition Dad had feared a Legion divided. To be sure, isolated centurions chafe in their barracks, yet this is nothing to dread. They need a head as a coin needs its head. Dad will more than suffice.

Marcello is confident all wounds will heal in short order; all petty complaints placed aside. He and Dad drink wine and congratulate themselves on a job well done. I lie at their feet and scheme to the best of my doggy ability. Unlike them, I am nervous of complacency. The new regime requires *something* to cement its unity. War dogs are not welcome in the parlor when the clamor of battle has subsided. Perhaps the conquered barbarians will test their chains and give us cause to rebuke them. If not the rebellious woodfolk, there is always a tribe rattling its shields. I think then of the pallid dwellers of Europa II, their vacuous demeanors and squirming mouths. We have not fired our rockets at the moon for too long. Dad should spread this message to those who command the Emperor's ear. Nothing serves to bury present troubles so well as fresh blood.

Marcello asks when Dad means to return to the capital. Dad says that he shall return when the Emperor summons him. Until then he will enjoy the restful ministrations of his lovely wife, and pray red-handed Mars permits a soldier's ease. Marcello laughs and glides away on a tradewind.

Dad and I watch him go. A crow regards us from the branches.

5

Twenty-two months since we discrowned the tyrant and installed his noble cousin Trajan. Dad is anxious that none of the new Emperor's promises have come to fruition. My master is a soldier's soldier and he plays the role. Part of that role is keeping one's mouth shut in public while complaining to one's dog in private.

Dad's duties as Consulate General carry him abroad. He has observed firsthand a growing discontent among the Legion ranks and the populace we protect.

We visit Prime at the wane of each moon and find her streets equally restless. Dad reports the news from fortresses along the rim of the empire. The Emperor's day-to-day security is overseen by Artificer Lyth and Commander Marcello. It is Lyth who frequently greets us in the Emperor's name. He is spindly and terrible. I do not enjoy the Grand Artificer's horrifying aspect, or the stench of malignance that seeps from the joints of his armor. Much occurs beyond the view of our esteemed leaders. The denizens of Europa II test our borders with increasing temerity. The jungles of Pash rustle with the activity of barbarian scouts. There are bombings. The Legion awaits word from Prime. No word is given. Dad hearkens to whispers of discontent and his lips thin into a grim line I've seen too often of late.

Emperor Trajan is a wise ruler; he vows to restore Prime to her former majesty. He vows to repeal the heaviest taxes, to rekindle our aggression toward the barbarians and their allies. He vows to return the teeth of our empire. Yet his days are full of courtly doings unrelated to these pledges. His tastes are… curious. He craves exotic entertainment at court. The silken charms of Far Western nymphs consume his attention. He is enthralled by the ecstatic powders of the southern realms. Captive barbarian princes twist in wicker cages above slow steam, and their misery quirks his lips with amusement.

When Dad is finally granted a personal audience, he speaks to his eminence of concerns regarding the Legion and of our far-flung provinces. The Emperor nods his blond head and promises to address the Senate. His glassy eye does not shift from the pale forms wilting in their prisons. Our time is always short—Artificer Lyth hovers near, a monstrous cleg in red and black. He swoops to bleed the Emperor—*the woodland savages carry many plagues, many plagues, indeed!*—and for this, privacy is essential.

Dad takes leave, questions unresolved. I give the Artificer a baleful glare in passing.

Dad customarily sups with Marcello and dour Iade and commends them to protect our Emperor from harm. His lieutenants assure Dad that the capital is proofed against the machinations of evildoers. In the end we fly from Prime, Dad smelling of uneasy thoughts. He should be pleased, except that he is too much like me in that regard. His instincts are powerful and they

whisper to him of danger. He groans in his sleep, reliving battles, or anticipating new ones.

Consulate General is an exalted post. A wealthy post. With Trajan upon the throne, it proves fantastically more so. Trajan lives in dread of assassins. The Legion wants for nothing. Our home is splendorous. Our servants are many. Dad's lands stretch from deep into fertile plains and shaded hills down the coast. The trees are heavy with fruit; cattle mill in green tracts. Horses stream across wide grasses. He no longer rides them; his back hurts too much for the saddle. It pleases him to watch them gallop beneath puffed clouds as I nip at their heels.

Adjoining our home is a massive structure, low-beamed and windowless. A storehouse for Dad's greatest prizes. He owns several vehicles—skimmers, racers, bi-spindle gliders, and a light war chariot. This last trifle is prohibited for non-military use. I too am government property. General Aniochles had often raised this point to the Emperor—when not rending the enemies of the Empire, my place was a barracks kennel, not serving as a lap dog to a commander. Yes, well fuck him too. Rank hath its privileges. I'm a bit long in the tooth. Snoozing on the plantation appeals to me more than I would've guessed back in the days I chewed iron and pissed fire.

In the concrete floor is a concealed trap that leads to a vault where Dad stores more interesting possessions. Here are his favorite toys—the blades and guns and armor of warfare. He keeps them in fine repair, each instrument polished and whetted in anticipation of grim eventualities. We do not enter the vault this day, although he glances at it with a far-eyed expression I know well. His scent causes me to sniff for hidden danger, yet I sense no enemies lurking. The odor I whiff from his pores is tinted with the same metal as his thrashing nightmares.

Today he does not wish to slaughter a barbarian regiment. He only wishes to drive a pleasure chariot. Before the barbarian troubles he amassed a fortune driving similar vehicles in races at the Hippodrome. Dangerous business, that. Perhaps more dangerous than being a war hero and a politician. He still likes to drive. So we go. I get stuffed into the copilot slot, webbed in and protected by a canine helm Artificer Trang devised before he took the long stroll into night. Artificer Trang had looked and smelled so much better than Lyth. I mourn the dead man as the helm snicks into place.

It is a warm, listless day. From the state-sponsored radiocast—last week's news. An opera by Laconte. String music. Long static-filled pauses. Nothing about the garrison bombing in New Portugal. Nothing about the Coliseum riot. Marcello sends him a terse message: *General, your presence is not required. The dissidents are quelled*. Dad does not enjoy this news. His jaw bunches, his hands clench. The people are increasingly restless. The stability of the Empire is paramount. More and more, she is anything but stable. Even a dog can see this.

A narrow road cuts through the white cliffs. It is neglected; the pavement is cracked. There are craters and switchbacks, and hairpin turns. Sometimes the road drops to sea level where rocks lie scattered, ready teeth. We flit past them, the sleek chariot whirring and trembling as it slices right to left with the precision of a stitching machine.

It is not the rocks or the turns that undoes him. A stag wandering from its field is the mechanism of our destruction. It appears in the road, a hoary brute with thick horns lowered. A gray wall. Why does Dad swerve? I do not know. The chariot would cut the beast down without issue. Nor is it fear that rules him—he has crushed many a foe's glider beneath his own, shorn valiant pilots from their cockpits with a scything sweep of his wing and exulted in the flames and the blood.

Yet, he turns aside. His iron hands are betrayed by a signal, an errant signal that I, with my superior senses almost apprehend in its passage. I smell guilt and awe. The chariot turns as it is commanded to turn and falls among the sharp rocks. The sky and the ocean grapple, trading positions. I recall that the white stag is Dad's personal standard, the standard of his noble lineage. I should make something of this, yet don't. Not in this moment. Terror masters me as we crash and burn.

Somewhere dead Aniochles chuckles. Difficult to hear him above the clatter of many shields thrown down at once, my despairing howl…

6

You are a destroyer, Rex.

It is true, what this ghost voice says. This accusing voice that shivers from wrapping fog. I am now, and have ever been, a destroyer of men. It is my

little niche. Some dogs fetch, some dogs preen. I crunch bones in my teeth and tear down the works of our enemies. Such work is noble. Some things *must* be torn down that more important virtues may thrive. I am needed as a wrecking bar is needed. There is no shame.

Protector of tyrants! The phantom hisses. *Like master, like dog! Lapdog, sycophant!*

The fog lifts and I see my beloved mentor, the Kennel Master Callys, alive in his armor. One of the few men I have ever feared. He is a brick furnace surrounded by soft-mouthed puppies in white tunics. He reeks of blood. The pups shine, eager for his instruction.

Callys teaches us there is nothing complicated about killing a dog or a man. The mechanics are quite straightforward. Some men die easily, other men are hard to kill. Dogs? Dogs are only as good as the hand on the leash. There is no mystery. To reflect upon the destruction of another man is the difficult portion. Instinct has taught us to bow in deference to the sacred pact that has existed since the era of cave dwellers.

First, we must never regard the enemy as men—they are *objectives* given flesh. Next, Callys advises us to wipe their faces from our minds. We must never look back. This applies to humans and dogs alike. It is the deepest secret to success in the Legion. Then he fits me with my first war collar and sends me with my pack-mates to dim Pash to do the Emperor’s work.

He is correct, my grizzled Callys. Men are easy to kill.

Common folk tell superstitious tales about the barbarians of Pash. The woodsmen are savages who fight with the vigor of ten centurions. They lay horrible traps and eat the flesh of our poor fighting boys. I find that the barbarian squeal and shit of their death throes are much the same as my pack brothers and the hastati who accompany us. It is almost a disappointment.

You are a hound of hell. Your master, your “father,” is a traitorous mutt. He is the real cur.

I am positive the barbarians who looked into my grinning face thought me a terror. The Legion is a juggernaut built to destroy the Empire’s foes. Nothing else. In the dim jungle my purpose is the juggernaut’s terrible

purpose, my Dad's purpose. If that makes me a fiend, then yes, I am a fiend. Gladly.

The fog lowers and bells clang, first at distance, now close and all around. War bells, no mistake. My pulse explodes, but the angry bells soon fade. My vision shifts as the fog boils, closing, and then receding. The old Emperor awaits my master and I upon the Capitol steps. He is a regal man; a king's king as his title indicates. He loves my master as a son, better than his own sons. My master, my human father, loves him right back. The old Emperor is called tyrant in some quarters. He does not trust in the greatness of Prime. His edicts are harsh. He expects every citizen to weigh his wealth and strength against the welfare of the Empire. The Empire is besieged from without and from within and the old Emperor believes a storm shall someday blow down the towers his ancestors have raised. Yes, the empire has many enemies. The old Emperor has more. Woe unto him. He hugs Dad to his breast. Dad looks away in shame, the way I hang my head after ruining the carpet.

What have you and your master done, hellhound?

I know Dad has come to resent this new, young Emperor. He regrets elevating lofty Trajan, he is disgusted at the debaucheries at court. He broods over the malaise abroad. A storm upon the horizon. The stag regards him with contempt and he turns my chariot toward the ocean.

What has my father done? I do not know. My poor overworked positronic brain is a crude marvel. It can only take me so far.

7

A spiked collar makes an excellent close-quarters weapon. Drive in with the spikes, rip out with the fangs! *It is among Callys' favorite exhortations.*

The enemy soldier, a barbarian mastiff smeared in red ochre, does both of these things to me. There is a skirmish to end all skirmishes. Chaos and fire. Men squirming in separate pieces; chattering reports of spindles and malspheres. Dogs whining their last. The mastiff whips me with his claws; his spikes tear my neck, his cracked fangs slash the flesh of my belly. I roll away and wheel. My spurting blood forms a circle in the dirt. I charge him through the sudden mud. He sinks his teeth deep into my shoulder and

braces for the killing twist. It is too late for him though. My jaws snap shut upon his neck, my diamond-sharp jaws, and there is no escape from them… Then Dad is there with his gladius blazing a nova and he cuts the mastiff in two. Dad is slathered in crimson. His left arm dangles, shattered. His body is full of holes. He laughs.

So I tell you, this small accident by the water is of no consequence.

Reports are we walked away from the wreckage of the chariot. I do not remember anything except darkness and the distant roar of my ancestors on the plain. I remember gauze curtains, leeches hovering in their robes. Mom weeps. She has seen Dad in the yard, gore from toe to crown, clothes rent from his body. Raving of battles long past. He carried me, a bloodied lump of torn fur and exposed bone. Mom thinks me dead while I dream of chasing the horses across endless fields toward the purple sea. The leeches also think me a goner; my injuries are grave. Ah, they don't know the trouble I've seen. I descend from the supreme canine bloodline. I am augmented with weaponry. I am built to endure.

Only I know that I have seen much worse. I do not say this when I open my eyes and see her nearby, mopping Dad's brow. My vocalizer seems to have been damaged in the crackup. I whine and sleep again.

8

Dad is a famous man; our accident is reported during numerous newscasts. Sabotage? The broadcasters are titillated. Flowers arrive from all corners of the empire. The Praetorian Guard establishes a cordon around the hospital. Citizens camp in the fields, hoping for a glimpse. It worries me to consider that some of them do not come bearing gifts or fond wishes. Yes, Dad is a famous man, but also a hated one if you ask the right people.

The days roll into weeks.

Faithful Mom keeps vigil, only leaving for the brief visits by Marcello, Iades, and Dad's other confidants. Marcello brings whiskey and cigarettes. The leeches wisely ignore these transactions.

The news from the capital isn't good. Three more riots in Prime. Food shortages are raising eyebrows among the Senate. However, the senators do

not seem concerned that we have lost a garrison near the Pash border. *A few centurions more or less, eh fellows?* These days the state radio does not cover foreign events at all. Football scores, celebrity gossip, music. The masses are surely as drugged as our fine Emperor.

I dream of the wreck. I dream of hunting. In the hunting dreams, the stag emerges from cover. He pauses to regard me, his mortal enemy. My tribe has stalked his kind since time immemorial. That my human father bears the stag as his heraldry seems a paradox, and one I am too weary to sort.

The stag's antlers catch the light and gleam like a crown of blades. His eyes are familiar. He tosses his shaggy head and ambles out onto the plain. The dream is a jumble of life and fantasy—I am injured from the chariot crash, and bleeding heavily, yet I follow my prey. Stubbornness is a virtue among dogs. The stag recedes to a blot and vanishes. I track his prints in the dirt. I snuffle his musk among the blades of the grass. I wander through a copse of trees and piss against one. The stag has escaped. Behind me, the plain is golden gulf edged in darkness.

I begin to retrace my steps back to the house. At first, this isn't difficult since I've left a trail of blood gleaming to light the way. A flake of snow loops around and catches on my tongue. Then a few more, and then many more until a blizzard erases the world and me with it. I awaken, filled with a terrible yearning that I do not understand.

Months burn.

We grow strong, Dad and I, although the leeches suggest Dad's proud visage shall not remind anyone of Adonis. A mild joke assayed by the chief surgeon who is too old to fear execution. Dad was never what you might consider handsome. Now he is a trifle worse. Beauty lines, the legionnaires call such scars.

Something has changed in my master. His smell has altered. He smells of sadness and of determination and regret. I know trouble is on the way. He smells of fire and anger and the desperate foolishness of youth.

Mom comforts us. We walk in the hospital garden. She is radiant in her fear. Her black hair, her carmine lips! Her eyes blaze with mysteries. I am entranced. She and Dad talk of small things and though they are only small things, I cannot imagine how I have always overlooked her cleverness. I am

sent to guard the front door. They mate there in the garden, beneath an olive tree. I hope he doesn't kill himself in the doing.

Mom has wanted a son. I wonder if now she shall receive her desire. Dad has muttered of it some nights when he'd drunk overmuch and fallen prey to sentiment.

After Mom departs with her handmaidens and bodyguards, Dad mutters to me, "May it please the gods my latest heroics grant her a child as I have failed her as a husband these long years."

In the morning she will find his sick bed empty. She will search while the servants lament. We will not be discovered.

9

An enclave nestles high in the mountains that shield the Empire from western aggressors. The name of the enclave is unimportant. What is important is that the progeny of various paranoid emperors have been sequestered here among bald monks and bearded goats. Few have heard of this enclave. Fewer know where it stands.

Dad is one of the latter and he lands his glider in a copse of paper birch. The walk is brief—we do not wish to run far if running becomes necessary. Because the air is chill he wraps a cloak about himself. Because he does not care to be recognized he wears a hood. In one hand he carries a lens—it has a nose for human chemicals. In the other hand he carries a rod. I alter my coat to blend with the terrain and lurk near his flank. I am on high alert.

It is late afternoon. The bark and leaves of the trees are changing colors. We pick our way through mossy boulders and across tiny streams. Soon, we spy the ancient stone battlement. Left seems a good direction, so we circle that way and mount a low rise screened by more birch and a few pines. A squatty monk in a brown cassock reclines among fallen leaves. Doubtless a lethal guardian. His job appears most boring. Dad whistles to me the whistle of a gyrfalcon. I greet the monk in Praetorian fashion and move on, licking my chops. At the summit there is a rocky clearing with a fine view of distant reaches. The world below is twilight damp.

The sensor blinks and purrs in Dad's hand.

Just ahead, a pair of children play at rough and tumble. The children cease their sport and observe our approach with sharp interest. Doubtless, they have been taught to fear strangers. The monks are not fools and know what the Emperor expects of them. Fear, however, is a difficult thing to teach. It is better learned from bitter experience and at unpleasant cost.

Dad is hardly fearsome with those bent shoulders, the exaggerated limp. As for me, I'm huge enough to scare anybody with sense, but I grin a friendly grin and wag my tail. Good dog! Dad lowers the hood and bares an avuncular smile. His scars do not alarm, they attract a natural curiosity, and the boys are his. One strokes my fur, surely wistful for the pets he left in his household. I'm the only domesticated animal around for leagues.

The boys dress simply, yet comport themselves as befits princelings. Neither has met his father, Emperor Trajan. Nonetheless, they are proud little bastards, with hints of requisite cruelty in the crinkle of their eyes. Their teeth are white as young carnivores. I have seen their like in my puppyhood kennels. Brutes in training.

Beyond them, the rearward quarter of the knoll has eroded like a cavity in a molar. Blue light fills the ravine and hides its foot. "A bad place to make sport," Dad says. "The monks would not approve." The boys laugh at his timidity. The elder quips that life in the palace has far deeper pitfalls.

Dad gazes out over the darkening land where the lights of Prime should soon be. And then, casually, he asks which of them shall be master when his illustrious father relinquishes the throne.

They are close enough in age that there is room for doubt, and thus each makes his answer. He nods sagely. And if master of Prime, how would they govern her territories? Again each makes his answer and as they answer I watch their faces and think my own thoughts. They can't smell the iron igniting in Dad's sweat. They cannot smell his smell that is incipient destruction. I hear the creak of his fingers tightening on the weapon at his belt.

Oh, I am certain of what he sees.

In a while he sends the younger boy down to the monastery—the supper bell rings faintly. He keeps the elder at his side—Dad claims he is feeble and will require the lad's muscle. But first, Dad asks him if he knows his

brother well. Indeed, the boy does. Does he suppose his brother would truly break the Praetorian Guard? The boy is contemptuous—of course his weakling brother would do such a stupid thing! The younger son lacks the sense to recognize how the powerful must be warded from the madness of their subjects.

Ah, yet don't ceaseless favors to the Praetorian Guard weaken the Legion and therefore the citizens? These are difficult times, are they not?

The boy sneers. If the flock must be sheared to clothe the shepherd, so be it. Dad smiles at his conviction and ask if he has ever seen proud Prime. No? Then come now and look across the chasm where night draws down. Stand here and look and see her lights as they spark and catch…

The boy does this. They stand there, Dad's iron hand loosely upon the boy's fragile shoulder. I whine softly, my tail swishing back and forth in the tough grass. Darkness falls. It is far to the bottom of the ravine.

10

Dad gets cute and tries to ditch me. He's sly, tossing a treat into the bushes as he makes for the glider. I'm faster and beat him to the vehicle. He grows exasperated. This may be a suicide mission. My growl tells him, no shit, General. I figured that for myself after we murdered that royal brat.

He commands me to lope home to Mom and guard her. The distance is vast. My mighty dog heart and cyborg parts will see me through. I plant my haunches in the copilot seat and snap at his hand when he attempts to drag me out. Eventually he relents, swearing vilely at my disobedience while smiling a secret smile.

"All right, stupid dog. Let's get you metal, at least." I consent to an ancient war harness. The harness is another accessory forged by the old master artificer, Trang, who was peerless in matters of defense. He designed it for the Max Series canines. Such brutes! Such killers! Perhaps less adaptable and handsome than myself, you had to give them credit for ferocity. Scoured with sand and blasted with sonics, I still whiff the taint of gore and death sweat embedded in the harness mesh. My eyes roll back, white, and then forward, black. I'm not a lapdog anymore. I am, as the dead philosopher said, a destroyer of worlds. Small worlds, but worlds.

Dad’s glider was once a racing machine. It shreds the wind. We beat rosy dawn to the capital. There are a thousand doors into the palace and all one thousand are guarded by his gold-armored Praetorians. We enter by the thousand and first.

Moving within the mazeworks, I speculate as to whether the monks back on their mountain have raised an alarm. Yes. Although it may be delayed while the monks seek a method to extract themselves from an untenable position. Trajan’s displeasure is invariably fatal.

This alarm being a given, has the news broadened to include a notice against Dad and me? Yes again. Marcello would add two and two and be first to give the order. Dad trained him well. He is clockwork, dire Marcello. His loves and hates are suits he folds away as the occasion warrants. His duty shall prevail against all else. There can be no doubt that if he spies us lurking about these halls he will kill us if he can. I drool at the idea of this confrontation

Iades? Iades is loyal to Dad. He is also a Praetorian. He will do as Marcello does. Dad is the most loyal of us all—he could’ve divided the Legion and loosed his partisans against the Emperor, perhaps even set himself upon the throne. Instead, he’s chosen the lonely path of the assassin, the man who will pay to liberate the country from an error in judgment with his own life.

Dad may not desire the death of his men, although I would happily gut them one and all at this point. My ire is stoked. We travel by secret ways and come at last to the inner sanctum of our dear Emperor. The way Dad chooses is arduous—it involves no small measure of slithering through vents and clambering over shelves with precipitous drops yawning at our toes. Dad’s wounds pain him; his muscles labor. I worry he will fail. Yet he is tough, my old man. He persists against and my focus narrows to ward him from a sudden fall.

Artificer Lyth nearly has us because of this. He is waiting in the shadowy heights of an arch and descends with horrible alacrity. The pleasure upon his unmasked visage is manifestly unsettling. Artificer Lyth detests us as much as we detest him. He does not summon the Guard. He radiates a craving for homicidal glory. The Artificer thinks us relics easily dispatched by his dreadful craft.

Dad kneels near a vertical drop into a bottomless crevice. His arms shake with the stress of the climb. He snatches for his gladius. Too slowly, alas. Thankfully, my reflexes prevail. I spy the enemy and charge, roaring. Magnetized plasma jets forth and shrouds the enemy in a corona of fire.

To my chagrin, his shielding absorbs the worst I can dish. I suppose I should count myself fortunate he doesn't manage to reflect the sluice back upon Dad and me. That would be embarrassing *and* fatal.

The Artificer bats smoking cinders from his hair, rubbery mouth slack with malice. A drop of blood gathers in his left nostril. The hem of his robe wisps smoke, charred along the panther trim. He flings elongated arms outward and makes claws of his fingers. Around me the air is rent with screeches and flickers of lethal geometry. Cracks race along the ageless granite pillars. Little fires slither, rootless. Most dogs would perish right here—smashed and burned to founding atoms from the grasp of Lyth's telekinetic machinery.

Not me. I am Rex, left paw to the Consulate General, and greatest of my kind. Artificer Lyth isn't the only one who can play this game. Trang embedded a network of kinetic shields and dampers into my war harness to counter precisely this sort of emergency. The harness is a powerful artifact, proof versus any detonation short of a tactical nuke, according to the literature. It's a near thing, regardless. My foe's malevolent gesture shorts the circuit and I bellow in agony as the harness melts and fuses into my hide. Consciousness contracts to a keyhole. Rationality is obliterated. However, I am spared and my foe is screwed.

Artificer Lyth cries in distress when his attack fails. He attempts to scuttle back up to his nesting place, and he is quick, but I am on him and my fangs are at his neck. And that is the end for Artificer Lyth. I hobble back to Dad and drop the Artificer's gaping skull at his feet. Dad chuckles and gently scratches my ears like old times. His jovial camaraderie belies a deep concern for my condition. I am brave and try not to signal the graveness of my injuries or how much I suffer. We must hurry, for the commotion will soon draw the attention of the Guard and loose ends yet dangle.

We limp and stagger and redouble our pace through these secret ways.

Emperor Trajan reclines within his vasty solar. Dad has chosen this moment well, for the Emperor is inclined to sleep late after titanic debaucheries. Our leader is alone save for drugged slaves and a handful of Praetorian guards—only select favorites are permitted access to his person at these revelries. Sadly, these dregs are mixed with two or three men who have served honorably. There is nothing for it, however. I lick my wounds as Dad makes his preparations to seal our fates as traitors or liberating heroes.

Dad has brought several terrible weapons, which he activates from the safety of a hidden nook. Soldiers are obliterated where they stand and soon the Emperor has been stripped of his final layer of security. Dad takes a moment to ensure the great obsidiron doors are sealed. It will require technicians with plasma torches many minutes to breach them.

To slay Trajan would be simple. His eyes are glass, he snores. He is unaware of the carnage at his feet; he is oblivious to Dad's looming presence. His slaves suffer from a similar malaise, sprawled about his dais, twitching with visions of erstwhile heroics.

Yes, to slay Trajan would require a mere gesture. Dad must only slide the knife between his ribs. Yet, he stays his hand and Trajan snores on. A dull gonging begins against the massive portals. I imagine the chaos beyond, the panic as the Guard is summoned to breach these gates.

So how now? Dad is vexed and bemused. I cannot help him in this matter, notwithstanding my confusion at his hesitation. The will to stand deserts me. I lie on my side and pant heavily, and encourage him with small whines and groans.

"I have destroyed one emperor," Dad says. "How wrong can a man be? This venal creature deserves the mercy of neither bullet nor blade. I will not stain my honor with his thin claret." His gaze wanders the length of the chamber and alights upon the answer to his dilemma. Nine elaborate cages depend above a steaming mud pit in the southwest quadrant. Nearby is a device that controls the pulleys and wires. This device swings the cages to my level and one by one he inspects them. In eight he discovers limp barbarian corpses, but in the ninth a healthy specimen who contrives to

feign death until I bark a warning and Dad bangs the bars, provoking the prisoner to stir.

Wasted from abuse and neglect, the barbarian remains a formidable mass within his prison. He reeks of righteous malice. Dad smiles at him and burns the lock half through with his gladius. The barbarian observes with hateful stoicism. His tribe plot devilry and vengeance unto their last exhalation. Their clans war in family units. Doubtless it has been his brothers and sisters boiled in these cages. I smell the pungent rage he experiences regarding the fates of his kinsmen.

Dad does not speak the barbarian tongue. Thus, he makes his intention clear with a casual glance toward the Emperor. Then he drops the gladius and walks away. It would require scant effort for a beast such as this imprisoned warrior to fling his bulk against the lock and be free to raven throughout the peaceful solar. Who knows what havoc he might wreak before the Praetorians gain entrance.

The portals tremble as tremendous efforts begin upon them in earnest. Still faint; there is much time as time goes. Farewell, my Emperor. The kid we met in the mountains will do fine in your absence.

Dad makes a travois of his cloak and wraps me in its folds. I protest—he must abandon me to my end and save himself. He doesn't listen. He has spoken, usually when drunk, of the primordial pact between man and dog. The pact has existed since men squatted in caves by their fires. Man and dog have been pack since we were more troglodyte, and more wolf.

We depart. Of course, this is a relative term. There is nowhere to go.

11

Because he was beloved before he earned the title of tyrant, the old Emperor's tomb is a grandiose complex of marble. It is built upon a hill not far from where Dad derailed his train as he escaped from Prime. Wildflowers sprinkle the terraces. The old Emperor's statue rises above the mausoleum dome and its stony eyes do not meet Dad's when he kneels to offer his respects.

I lie nearby, swaddled and if not peaceful, resigned. I press my snout to Mom’s white kerchief that Dad took from his pocket to dab the gore draining from me. He whispered that if I should go on ahead and clear the way, I was a good dog and that he loved me. I breathe Mom’s perfume and she is here, her scent stronger than any dim memory of my own canine mother or littermates.

Dad’s weapons are spread beside me in a fan. Even now my mind ticks with possibilities. Is there any strength left in these bones? Could I summon a last effort to fight at Dad’s side when the Legion comes to snuff him for our treason?

Grassy fields curve unto sky notched by clouds. Somewhere the metropolis buzzes and wasps boil from the hive. At last I observe tiny shadow flickers of gliders and kites between the seam of heaven and earth. I imagine Marcello’s colors among the van. They search in swooping patterns that will soon intersect our hill.

The sun is warm on my muzzle. I drowse.

A stag appears in the field below. He coughs a challenge and nods his majestic skull. He gives me an insolent flick of his stub tail and eases toward the tall grass. Instinct, oh she truly is a bitch, and I’m on my feet in pursuit.

Pain swells and then recedes. My gait steadies. I breathe deeply of grass and musk. The breeze quickens and the sky dulls. Snow begins to fall. Soon, the stag has vanished. His tracks are swallowed in white drifts. The grass freezes like blades of upright knives.

I don’t know how long this goes on. I wander for hours, for days, for ages. Long enough that I forget what drew me here or where I’ve been. The dark and the cold and the wind and my loneliness is everything. I hear a voice from afar and my ears prick up. The voice of the wind calls my name and draws me to a hill of ice and stone. Ruddy light glimmers from within the mouth of a cave. I smell cooking meat. The two sides of my dog’s mind have a skirmish.

In the end, I creep forward. I’ll go inside and see what’s there. Perhaps I’ll warm myself by the fire.

Ears Prick Up

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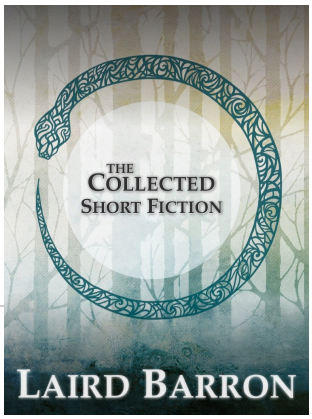


1.

My kind is swift to chase, swift to battle. My imperfect memory is long with longing for the fight. Gray and arthritic in the twilight of retirement from valorous service to the Empire, my hackles still bunch at the clink of metal on metal. My yawn is an expression of doom sublimated. I dream of chasing elk across the plains of my ancient ancestors. I dream of blizzards and ice fields that merge with the bitter stars. In my dreams, I always die.

2.

I traveled far from home in my youth. Dad and I slugged it out with a whole platoon of black hats one night as we strolled across the tundra of the Utter North. Military commandos hired to assassinate us; every man and dog marked with the mark of a secret gang, scents masked in case of failure. Poor, stupid fools. Probably sent by General Aniochles who figured Dad was gunning for his job. Bet my bottom chew toy the sonofabitch made the call. He gave Dad dagger eyes whenever they chatted at court. Bastard smelled guilty to me and that's what I knew. Well, I knew right.

I wasn't a pup then. I wasn't approaching my warranty date, either. My eyes glowed red with atomic radiation. My fangs gleamed in a grin that would have made a T. Rex flinch, appropriately enough, because they named me, my whole series, after the terrible king extinct these many eons, but unforgotten. Dad papered the walls of my kennel with color photos of dinos and wolves and exploding missiles to give me the right idea about how I should behave when he cried, "Sic 'em, Rex!"

Dad let slip the leash and I sicced, oh boy. Happiest of growls is the snarl of a locked jaw.

Bullets cracked all around us, and fire flashed all around us, while I lunged to and fro, hip deep in blood and mud the way dearly departed Kennel Master Callys and his best dog, Shotsum-Loathsum, taught me at the war academy. Shotsum-Loathsum was one of a kind, the failed Cerberus series, and they never again made his equal. He had two heads (a third just wasn't feasible), one more vicious than the other! Might've been the meanest mutt to ever prowl the yard. Gave me this beauty scar on my muzzle, and I thank him.

I belched hellfire and howled sonic death. With each snap I sheared an armored arm here, a leg there. Those days were my destroying angel days. I could tear the tread from a tank and whip you with it. Fear pumped acid through my blood and accelerated my reactions. Fear tasted like raw meat, made me drool. Fear made me greater than my design which had attempted to render me fearless. That's why they canceled my line too. Hard to control a thinking dog.

I leaped in front of Dad as somebody opened up on him with an antipersonnel gun and got shot a whole bunch for my troubles. The impact knocked me flat and splintered a stand of trees into kindling.

They shouldn't have done. Dad cursed his worst. He powered the prototype off-market rockets on his exoskeleton and gave back an eye for an eye, lighted a mushroom cloud where we struggled. Could have spotted us from orbit. In the end we killed the bastards and collapsed upon that slagged hunk of arctic plain, half done in ourselves. I groaned, fur shredded, titanium plates pierced and leaking the good stuff almost too fast for my personal cloud of nanobots to plug the works. Go little nanobots! My tongue lolled and I whimpered.

Dad patted my head. "Live it up, Rex. Once all the bad guys are dead, they'll retire us to the Happy Hunting Grounds."

Vexes me to this day that I don't know about the Happy Grounds. The pertinent entry seems to have been purged from my data banks.

3.

Revisit this twenty or so years down the line. I'm a grizzled veteran. The powers that be have phased out the Rex Series. Dad must truly be sentimental because he keeps me around despite an abundance of options. My joints ache, my servos grind louder. I hope nobody notices.

The train sprawls in the long grass, a ravel of silver below this bare hill. A stutter of pops and flashes and the tyrant is dead. I should be down there, jaws agape, eyes flashing fire, my howl obliterating the courage of the enemy. Instead I crouch at my master's heel and growl in malice. Younger men and younger dogs do the dirty work.

Dad has killed the Emperor with a word. Long live the Emperor.

Dad's men approach, green mud on their faces, and report that this is so. They are good soldiers. He picked them carefully as a farmer picks the best fruit from his orchard. They present him with a basket containing the tyrant's head—a basket of white birch in the ancient samurai custom. There are no longer samurai, but we do not forget.

Dad's men report that the tyrant's wife is also dead, the young, beautiful one who refused to part from him when the palace fell and his people lighted great fires and shouted for his blood. Dad's men report how they have killed the tyrant's children, even the one who hid cleverly below the floorboards. They are good men, thorough men. He is pleased. I see it in the relaxing of his shoulders, smell it in his scent. I smell sadness too—he and the Emperor were pack, once.

Our new Emperor Trajan is jubilant. He commends our valor when Dad calls on the red phone to explain the garden has been weeded. The new Emperor asks Dad to fetch the tyrant's banner to Prime. Trajan will spread it before the door of his toilet. There will be celebrations; we are invited. I will receive a medal of valor and a juicy ox bone. I have a cabinet of medals. I am the most decorated canine soldier in the history of the Empire.

Even as they speak on the red phone it rains, and through the rain I watch the tyrant's banner curl with flames. No matter. Dad knows of a three-fingered tailor in New Naples who will make us another.

4.

Mom is happy when we finally return to our home by the white cliffs. She feeds Dad grapes from the vineyard and cheese from the goat. She bathes him from a ceremonial basin. They retire behind a bamboo screen to mate.

In the morning I water the big tree near the main gate and rest there for a while. The ocean is off to my left, dull beneath the cliffs and patterned with hungry birds. The tree is to my right, like me, a piece of old metal—scarred and stained, white-puckered grooves radiating from the axis of its foundation. Such low, dark trees dot the ragged coast, but I am informed they do not spring native from this dirt. I wonder if they remember their birth-grounds by some impulse caught in the plexus of heartwood and cambial glue. When the winds rush off the water my tree seems to nod at the sky. It murmurs.

Marcello arrives in his glider when the sun grows fat. My tail wags with a crazy mind of its own. Marcello is black as pitch and always smells of violence, which I adore. His eyes are rivets in a cold bulk. Of all loyal hounds in Dad's stable, he is dominant. Oh, I could rend him, if growl came to snap, for I am Rex, greatest of my kind. What a battle that would be!

My brains are superior to most canines. Nonetheless, the primitive beast within me isn't much for long-term planning. *His* stratagems are Dad's long knives. Marcy (Dad calls him that when it's just the boys) is a ruthless man. This is his chief virtue, in my humble opinion—current events call for ruthlessness. It is the time of dog-eat-dog.

They recline near the scarred tree and discuss the situation in Prime. The ocean is smooth today and Prime is an invisible place where people from books compete for favors. These folk caper at court—clowns, buffoons, trained seals in bright clothes.

Dad too competed once. Oh yes.

The old Emperor loved him well. The previous ministers were less charmed by Dad's heroics in the war against the barbarians. General Aniochles, Dad's bitterest rival, had openly warned the old Emperor about the dangers of war heroes with the keys to the Legion. Aniochles was a foreigner—some speculate that barbarian water tainted his veins, and so the old Emperor chose to turn a deaf ear. Later, Aniochles got torn apart by the

mob which stormed the palace during the glorious revolution. I wish we had found his body so I could have pissed upon it.

Marcello says that Prime is a safer place now. The partisans of the old Emperor have been rooted out and shriven. More importantly, the partisans of the old General have been dealt their rewards. During the plans for the Grand Transition, Dad had feared a Legion divided. To be sure, isolated centurions chafe in their barracks, yet this is nothing to dread. They need a head as a coin needs its head. Dad will more than suffice.

Marcello is confident all wounds will heal in short order, all petty complaints will be placed aside. He and Dad drink wine and congratulate themselves on a job well done. I lie at their feet and scheme to the best of my doggy ability. Unlike them, I am nervous of complacency. The new regime requires *something* to cement its unity. War dogs are not welcome in the parlor when the clamor of battle has subsided. Perhaps the conquered barbarians will test their chains and give us cause to rebuke them. If not the rebellious woodfolk, there is always a tribe rattling its shields. I think then of the pallid dwellers of Europa II, their vacuous demeanors and squirming mouths. We have not fired our rockets at the moon for too long. Dad should spread this message to those who command the Emperor's ear. Nothing serves to bury present troubles so well as fresh blood.

Marcello asks when Dad means to return to the Capital. Dad says that he shall return when the Emperor summons him. Until then he will enjoy the restful ministrations of his lovely wife, and pray red-handed Mars permits a soldier's ease. Marcello laughs and glides away on a trade wind.

Dad and I watch him go. A crow regards us from the branches.

5.

Twenty-two months since we discrowned the tyrant and installed his noble cousin Trajan. Dad is anxious that none of the new Emperor's promises have come to fruition. My master is a soldier's soldier and he plays the role. Part of that role is keeping one's mouth shut in public while complaining to one's dog in private.

Dad's duties as Consulate General carry him abroad. He has observed firsthand a growing discontent among the Legion ranks and the populace

we protect.

We visit Prime at the wane of each moon and find her streets equally restless. Dad reports the news from fortresses along the rim of the empire. The Emperor's day to day security is overseen by Artificer Lyth and Commander Marcello. It is Lyth who frequently greets us in the Emperor's name. He is spindly and terrible. I do not enjoy the Grand Artificer's horrifying aspect, or the stench of malignance that seeps from the joints of his armor. Much occurs beyond the view of our esteemed leaders. The denizens of Europa II test our borders with increasing temerity. The jungles of Pash rustle with the activity of barbarian scouts. There are bombings. The Legion awaits word from Prime. No word is given. Dad hearkens whispers of discontent and his lips thin into a grim line I've seen too often of late.

Emperor Trajan is a wise ruler; he vows to restore Prime to her former majesty. He vows to repeal the heaviest taxes, to rekindle our aggression toward the barbarians and their allies. He vows to return the teeth of our empire. Yet his days are full of courtly doings unrelated to these pledges. His tastes are… curious. He craves exotic entertainment at court. The silken charms of Far Western nymphs consume his attention. He is enthralled by the ecstatic powders of the southern realms. Captive barbarian princes twist in wicker cages above slow steam, and their misery quirks his lips with amusement.

When Dad is finally granted a personal audience, he speaks to his eminence of concerns regarding the Legion and of our far-flung provinces. The Emperor nods his blond head and promises to address the Senate. His glassy eye does not shift from the pale forms wilting in their prisons. Our time is always short—Artificer Lyth hovers near, a monstrous cleg in red and black. He swoops to bleed the Emperor—*the woodland savages carry many plagues, many plagues, indeed!* —and for this, privacy is essential.

Dad takes leave, questions unresolved. I give the Artificer a baleful glare in passing.

Dad customarily sups with Marcello and dour Iade and commends them to protect our Emperor from harm. His lieutenants assure Dad that the Capital is proof versus the machinations of evildoers. In the end we fly from Prime,

Dad smelling of uneasy thoughts. He should be pleased, except that he is too much like me in that regard. His instincts are powerful and they whisper to him of danger. He groans in his sleep, reliving battles, or anticipating new ones.

Consulate General is an exalted post. A wealthy post. With Trajan upon the throne, it proves fantastically more so. Trajan lives in dread of assassins. The Legion wants for nothing. Our home is splendorous. Our servants are many. Dad's lands stretch from deep into fertile plains and shaded hills down the coast. The trees are heavy with fruit; cattle mill in green tracts. Horses stream across wide grasses. He no longer rides them; his back hurts too much for the saddle. It pleases him to watch them gallop beneath puffed clouds as I nip at their heels.

Adjoining our home is a massive structure, low-beamed and windowless. A storehouse for Dad's greatest prizes. He owns several vehicles—skimmers, racers, bi-spindle gliders, and a light war chariot. This last trifle is prohibited for non-military use. I too am government property. General Aniochles had often raised this point to the Emperor—when not rending the enemies of the Empire, my place was a barracks kennel, not serving as a lap dog to a commander. Yes, well fuck him too. Rank hath its privileges. I'm a bit long in the tooth. Snoozing on the plantation appeals to me more than I would've guessed back in the days I chewed iron and pissed fire.

In the concrete floor is a concealed trap that leads to a vault where Dad stores much more interesting things. Here are his favorite toys—the blades and guns and armor of warfare. He keeps them in fine repair, each instrument polished and whetted in anticipation of grim eventualities. We do not enter the vault this day, although he glances at it with a far-eyed expression I know well. His scent causes me to sniff for hidden danger, yet I sense no enemies lurking. The odor I whiff from his pores is tinted with the same metal as his thrashing nightmares.

Today he does not wish to slaughter a barbarian regiment. He only wishes to drive a pleasure chariot. Before the barbarian troubles he amassed a fortune driving similar vehicles in races at the Hippodrome. Dangerous business, that. Perhaps more dangerous than being a war hero and a politician. He still likes to drive. So we go. I get stuffed into the copilot slot, webbed in and protected by a canine helm Artificer Trang devised before he

took the long stroll into Night. Artificer Trang had looked and smelled so much better than Lyth. I mourn the dead man as the helm snicks into place.

It is a warm, listless day. From the state-sponsored radiocast—last week's news. An opera by Laconte. String music. Long static-filled pauses. Nothing about the garrison bombing in New Portugal. Nothing about the Coliseum riot. Marcello sends him a terse message: *General, your presence is not required. The dissidents are quelled*. Dad does not enjoy this news. His jaw bunches, his hands clench. The people are increasingly restless. The stability of the Empire is paramount. More and more, she is anything but stable. Even a dog can see this.

A narrow road cuts through the white cliffs. It is neglected; the pavement is cracked. There are craters and switchbacks, and hairpin turns. Sometimes the road drops to sea level where rocks lie scattered like ready teeth. We flit past them, the sleek chariot whirring and trembling as it slices right to left with the precision of a stitching machine.

It is not the rocks or the turns that undo him. A stag wandering from its field is the mechanism of our destruction. It appears in the road, a hoary brute with thick horns lowered. A gray wall. Why does Dad swerve? I do not know. The chariot would cut the beast down without issue. Nor is it fear that rules him—he has crushed many a foe's glider beneath his own, shorn valiant pilots from their cockpits with a scything sweep of his wing and exulted in the flames and the blood.

Yet, he turns aside. His iron hands are betrayed by a signal, an errant signal that I, with my superior senses, almost apprehend in its passage. I smell guilt and awe. The chariot turns as it is commanded to turn and falls among the sharp rocks. The sky and the ocean grapple, trading positions. I recall that the white stag is Dad's personal standard, the standard of his noble lineage. I should make something of this, yet don't. Not in this moment. Terror masters me as we crash and burn.

Somewhere, dead Aniochles chuckles. Difficult to hear him above the clatter of many shields thrown down at once, my despairing howl…

6.

You are a destroyer, Rex.

It is true, what this ghost voice says. This accusing voice that shivers from wrapping fog. I am now and have ever been a destroyer of men. It is my little niche. Some dogs fetch, some dogs preen. I crunch bones in my teeth and tear down the works of our enemies. Such work is noble. Some things *must* be torn down that more important virtues may thrive. I am needed as a wrecking bar is needed. There is no shame.

Protector of tyrants! The phantom hisses. *Like master, like dog! Lapdog, sycophant!*

The fog lifts and I see my beloved mentor, the Kennel Master Callys, alive in his armor. One of the few men I have ever feared. He is a brick furnace surrounded by soft-mouthed puppies in white tunics. He reeks of blood. The pups shine, eager for his instruction.

Callys teaches us there is nothing complicated about killing a dog or a man. The mechanics are quite straightforward. Some men die easily, other men die hard. Dogs? Dogs are only as good as the hand on the leash. There is no mystery. To reflect upon the destruction of another man is the difficult portion. Instinct has taught us to bow in deference to the sacred pact that has existed since the era of cave dwellers.

First, we must never regard the enemy as men—they are *objectives* given flesh. Next, Callys advises us to wipe their faces from our minds. We must never look back. This applies to humans and dogs alike. It is the deepest secret to success in the Legion. Then he fits me with my first war collar and sends me with my pack-mates to dim Pash to do the Emperor’s work.

He is correct, my grizzled Callys. Men are easy to kill.

Common folk tell superstitious tales about the barbarians of Pash. The woodsmen are savages who fight with the vigor of ten centurions. They lay horrible traps and eat the flesh of our poor fighting boys. I find that the barbarian squeal and shit in their death throes much the same as my pack brothers and the hastati who accompany us. It is almost a disappointment.

You are a hound of hell. Your master, your “father,” is a traitorous mutt. He is the real cur.

I am positive the barbarians who looked into my grinning face thought me a terror. The Legion is a juggernaut built to destroy the Empire’s foes. Nothing else. In the dim jungle my purpose is the juggernaut’s terrible

purpose, my Dad's purpose. If that makes me a fiend, then yes, I am a fiend. Gladly.

The fog lowers and bells clang, first at distance, now close and all around. War bells, no mistake. My pulse explodes, but the angry bells soon fade. My vision shifts as the fog boils, closing, then receding. The old Emperor awaits my master and I upon the Capitol steps. He is a regal man; a king's king as his title indicates. He loves my master as a son, better than his own sons. My master, my human father, loves him right back. The old Emperor is called tyrant in some quarters. He does not trust in the greatness of Prime. His edicts are harsh. He expects every citizen to weigh his wealth and strength against the welfare of the Empire. The Empire is besieged from without and from within and the old Emperor believes a storm shall someday blow down the towers his ancestors have raised. Yes, the Empire has many enemies. The old Emperor has more. Woe unto him. He hugs Dad to his breast. Dad looks away in shame the way I hang my head after ruining the carpet.

What have you and your master done, hell hound?

I know Dad has come to resent this new, young Emperor. He regrets elevating lofty Trajan, he is disgusted at the debaucheries at court. He broods over the malaise abroad. A storm upon the horizon. The stag regards him with contempt and he turns my chariot toward the ocean.

What has my father done? I do not know. My poor overworked positronic brain is a crude marvel. It can only take me so far.

7.

A spiked collar makes an excellent close-quarters weapon. Drive in with the spikes, rip out with the fangs! It is among Callys' favorite exhortations.

The enemy soldier, a barbarian mastiff smeared in red ochre, does both of these things to me. There is a skirmish to end all skirmishes. Chaos and fire. Men squirming in separate pieces; chattering reports of spindles and malspheres. Dogs whining their last. The mastiff whips me with his claws; his spikes tear my neck; his cracked fangs slash the flesh of my belly. I roll away and wheel. My spurting blood forms a circle in the dirt. I charge him through the sudden mud. He sinks his teeth deep into my shoulder and

braces for the killing twist. It is too late for him though. My jaws snap shut upon his neck, my diamond-sharp jaws, and there is no escape from them… Then Dad is there with his gladius blazing a nova and he cuts the mastiff in two. Dad is slathered in crimson. His left arm dangles, shattered. His body is full of holes. He laughs.

So I tell you, this small accident by the water is of no consequence.

Reports are we walked away from the wreckage of the chariot. I do not remember anything except darkness and the distant roar of my ancestors on the plain. I remember gauze curtains, leeches hovering in their robes. Mom weeps. She has seen Dad in the yard, gore from toe to crown, clothes rent from his body. Raving of battles long past. He carried me, a bloodied lump of torn fur and exposed bone. Mom thinks me dead while I dream of chasing the horses across endless fields toward the purple sea. The leeches also think me a goner; my injuries are so grave. Ah, they don't know the trouble I've seen. I descend from the supreme canine bloodline. I am augmented with weaponry. I am built to endure.

Only I know that I have seen much worse. I do not say this when I open my eyes and see her nearby, mopping Dad's brow. My vocalizer seems to have been damaged in the crackup. I whine and sleep again.

8.

Dad is a famous man; our accident is reported during numerous newscasts. Sabotage? The broadcasters are titillated. Flowers arrive from all corners of the empire. The Praetorian Guard establishes a cordon around the hospital. Citizens camp in the fields, hoping for a glimpse. It worries me to consider that some of them do not come bearing gifts or fond wishes. Yes, Dad is a famous man, but also a hated one if you ask the right people.

The days roll into weeks.

Faithful Mom keeps vigil, only leaving for the brief visits by Marcello, Iades, and Dad's other confidants. Marcello brings whiskey and cigarettes. The leeches wisely ignore these transactions.

The news from the Capital isn't good. Three more riots in Prime. Food shortages are raising eyebrows among the Senate. However, the senators do

not seem concerned that we have lost a garrison near the Pash border. *A few centurions more or less, eh fellows?* These days the state radio does not cover foreign events at all. Football scores, celebrity gossip, music. The masses are surely drugged as our fine Emperor.

I dream of the wreck. I dream of hunting. In the hunting dreams, the stag emerges from cover. He pauses to regard me, his mortal enemy. My tribe has stalked his kind since time immemorial. That my human father bears the stag as his heraldry seems a paradox, and one I am too weary to sort.

The stag's antlers catch the light and gleam like a crown of blades. His eyes are familiar. He tosses his shaggy head and ambles out onto the plain. The dream is a jumble of life and fantasy—I am injured from the chariot crash, and bleeding heavily, yet I follow my prey. Stubbornness is a virtue among dogs. The stag recedes to a blot and vanishes. I track his prints in the dirt. I snuffle his musk among the blades of the grass. I wander through a copse of trees and piss against one. The stag has escaped. Behind me, the plain is golden gulf edged in darkness.

I begin to retrace my steps back to the house. At first, this isn't difficult since I've left a trail of blood gleaming to light the way. A flake of snow loops around and catches on my tongue. Then a few more, and then many more until a blizzard erases the world and me with it. I awaken, filled with a terrible yearning that I do not understand.

Months burn.

We grow strong, Dad and I, although the leeches suggest Dad's proud visage shall not remind anyone of Adonis. A mild joke assayed by the chief surgeon who is too old to fear execution. Dad was never what you might consider handsome. Now he is a trifle worse. Beauty lines, the legionnaires call such scars. Something has changed in my master. His smell has altered. He smells of sadness and of determination and regret. I know trouble is on the way. He smells of fire and anger and the desperate foolishness of youth.

Mom comforts us. We walk in the hospital garden. She is splendorous in her fear. Her black hair, her carmine lips! Her eyes blaze with mysteries. I am entranced. She and Dad talk of small things and though they are only small things I cannot imagine how I have always overlooked her cleverness.

I am sent to guard the front door. They mate there in the garden, beneath an olive tree. I hope he doesn't kill himself in the doing.

Mom has wanted a son. I wonder if now she shall receive her desire. Dad has muttered of it some nights when he'd drunk overmuch and fallen prey to sentiment.

After Mom departs with her handmaidens and bodyguards, Dad mutters to me, "May it please the gods my latest heroics grant her a child as I have failed her as a husband these long years."

In the morning she will find his sick bed empty. She will search while the servants lament. We will not be discovered.

9.

An enclave nestles high in the mountains that shield the Empire from western aggressors. The name of the enclave is unimportant. What is important is that for ages the progeny of various paranoid emperors have been sequestered here among bald monks and bearded goats. Few have heard of this enclave. Fewer know where it stands.

Dad is one of the latter and he lands his glider in a copse of paper birch. The walk is brief—we do not wish to run far if running becomes necessary. Because the air is chill he wraps a cloak about himself. Because he does not care to be recognized he wears a hood. In one hand he carries a lens—it has a nose for human chemicals. In the other hand he carries a rod. I alter my coat to blend with the terrain and lurk near his flank. I am on high alert.

It is late afternoon. The bark and leaves of the trees are changing colors. We pick our way through mossy boulders and across tiny streams. Soon, we spy the ancient stone of a battlement. Left seems a good direction, so we circle that way and mount a low rise screened by more birch and a few pines. A squatty monk in a brown cassock reclines among fallen leaves. Doubtless a lethal guardian. His job appears most boring. Dad whistles to me the whistle of a gyrfalcon. I greet the monk in Praetorian fashion and move on, licking my chops. At the summit there is a rocky clearing with a fine view of distant reaches. The world below is twilight damp.

The sensor blinks and purrs in Dad's hand.

Ahead, a pair of children play at rough and tumble. The children cease their sport and observe our approach with sharp interest. Doubtless, they have been taught to fear strangers. The monks are not fools and know what the Emperor expects of them. Fear, however, is a difficult thing to teach. It is better learned from bitter experience and at unpleasant cost.

Dad is hardly fearsome with those bent shoulders, the exaggerated limp. As for me, I'm huge enough to scare anybody with sense, but I grin a friendly grin and wag my tail. Good dog! Dad lowers the hood and bares an avuncular smile. His scars do not alarm, they attract a natural curiosity, and the boys are his. One strokes my fur, surely wistful for the pets he left in his household. I'm the only domesticated animal around for leagues.

The boys dress simply, yet comport themselves as befits princelings. Neither has met his father, Emperor Trajan. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they are proud little bastards, with hints of requisite cruelty in the crinkle of their eyes. Their teeth are white as young carnivores. I have seen their like in my puppyhood kennels. Brutes in training.

Beyond them, the rearward quarter of the knoll has eroded like a cavity in a molar. Blue light fills the ravine and hides its foot. "A bad place to make sport," Dad says. "The monks would not approve." The boys laugh at his timidity. The elder quips that life in the palace has far deeper pitfalls.

Dad gazes out over the darkening land where the lights of Prime should soon be. And then, casually, he asks which of them shall be master when his illustrious father relinquishes the throne.

They are close enough in age that there is room for doubt, and thus each makes his answer. He nods sagely. And if master of Prime, how would they govern her territories? Again each makes his answer and as they answer I watch their faces and think my own thoughts. They can't smell the iron igniting in Dad's sweat. They cannot smell his smell that is incipient destruction. I hear the creak of his fingers tightening on the weapon at his belt.

Oh, I am certain of what he sees.

In a while he sends the younger boy down to the monastery—the supper bell rings faintly. He keeps the elder at his side—Dad claims he is feeble and will require the lad's muscle. But first, Dad asks him if he knows his

brother well. Indeed, the boy does. Does he suppose his brother would truly break the Praetorian Guard? The boy is contemptuous—of course his weakling brother would do such a stupid thing! The younger son lacks the sense to recognize how the powerful must be warded from the madness of their subjects.

Ah, yet don't ceaseless favors to the Praetorian Guard weaken the Legion and therefore the citizens? These are difficult times, are they not?

The boy sneers. If the flock must be sheared to clothe the shepherd, so be it. Dad smiles at his conviction and asks if he has ever seen proud Prime. No? Then come now and look across the chasm where night draws down. Stand here and look and see her lights as they spark and catch…

The boy does this. They stand there, Dad's iron hand loosely upon the boy's fragile shoulder. I whine softly, my tail swishing back and forth in the tough grass. Darkness falls. It is far to the bottom of the ravine.

10.

Dad gets cute and tries to ditch me. He's all sly with the tossing of a treat into the bushes as he makes for the glider. I'm faster and beat him to the vehicle. He grows exasperated. This may be a suicide mission. My growl tells him, no shit, General. I figured that for myself after we murdered that royal brat.

He commands me to lope home to Mom and guard her. The distance is vast. My mighty dog heart and cyborg parts will see me through. I plant my haunches in the copilot seat and snap at his hand when he attempts to drag me out. Eventually he relents, swearing vilely at my disobedience while smiling a secret smile.

"All right, stupid dog. Let's get you metal, at least." I consent to an ancient war harness. The harness is another accessory forged by the old master artificer, Trang, who was peerless in matters of defense. He designed it for the Max Series canines. Such brutes! Such killers! Perhaps less adaptable and handsome than myself, you had to give them credit for ferocity. Scoured with sand and blasted with sonics, I still whiff the taint of gore and death sweat embedded in the harness mesh. My eyes roll back, white, then

forward, black. I’m not a lapdog anymore. I am, as the dead philosopher said, a destroyer of worlds. Small worlds, but worlds.

Dad’s glider was once a racing machine. It shreds the wind. We beat Rosy Dawn to the Capital. There are a thousand doors into the palace and all one thousand are guarded by his gold-armored Praetorians. We enter by the thousand and first.

Moving within the mazeworks, I speculate as to whether an alarm has been raised by the monks back on their mountain. Yes. Although it may be delayed while the monks seek a method to extract themselves from an untenable position. Trajan’s displeasure is invariably fatal.

This alarm being a given, has the news broadened to include a notice against Dad and me? Yes again. Marcello would add two and two and be first to give the order. Dad trained him well. He is a clockwork, dire Marcello. His loves and hates are suits he folds away as the occasion warrants. His duty shall prevail against all else. There can be no doubt that if he spies us lurking about these halls he will kill us if he can. I drool at the idea of this confrontation

Iades? Iades is loyal to Dad. He is also a Praetorian. He will do as Marcello does. Dad is the most loyal of us all—he could’ve divided the Legion and loosed his partisans against the Emperor, perhaps even set himself upon the throne. Instead, he’s chosen the lonely path of the assassin, the man who will pay to liberate the country from an error in judgment with his own life.

Dad may not desire the death of his men, although I would happily gut them one and all at this point. My ire is stoked. We travel by secret ways and come at last to the inner sanctum of our dear Emperor. The way Dad chooses is arduous—it involves no small measure of slithering through vents and clambering over shelves with precipitous drops yawning at our toes. Dad’s wounds pain him; his muscles labor. I worry he will fail. He is tough, my old man. He persists against and my focus narrows to ward him from a sudden fall.

Artificer Lyth nearly has us because of this. He is waiting in the shadowy heights of an arch and descends with horrible alacrity. The pleasure upon his unmasked visage is manifestly unsettling. Artificer Lyth detests us as much as we detest him. He does not summon the Guard. He radiates a

craving for homicidal glory. The Artificer thinks us relics easily dispatched by his dreadful craft.

Dad kneels near a vertical drop into a bottomless crevice. His arms shake with the stress of the climb. He snatches for his gladius. Too slowly, alas. Thankfully, my reflexes prevail. I spy the enemy and charge, roaring. Magnetized plasma jets forth and shrouds the enemy in a corona of fire.

To my chagrin, his shielding absorbs the worst I can dish. I suppose I should count myself fortunate he doesn't manage to reflect the sluice back upon me and Dad. That would be embarrassing *and* fatal.

The Artificer bats smoking cinders from his hair, rubbery mouth slack with malice. A drop of blood gathers in his left nostril. The hem of his robe wisps smoke, charred along the panther trim. He flings elongated arms outward and makes claws of his fingers. Around me the air is rent with screeches and flickers of lethal geometry. Cracks race along the ageless granite pillars. Little fires slither, rootless. Most dogs would perish right here—smashed and burned to founding atoms from the grasp of Lyth's telekinetic machinery.

Not me. I am Rex, left paw to the Consulate General, and greatest of my kind. Artificer Lyth isn't the only one who can play this game. Trang embedded a network of kinetic shields and dampers into my war harness to counter precisely this sort of emergency. The harness is a powerful artifact, proof versus any detonation short of a tactical nuke, according to the literature. It's a near thing, regardless. My foe's malevolent gesture shorts the circuit and I bellow in agony as the harness melts and fuses into my hide. Consciousness contracts to a keyhole. Rationality is obliterated. However, I am spared and my foe is screwed.

Artificer Lyth cries in distress when his attack fails. He attempts to scuttle back up to his nesting place, and he is quick, but I am on him and my fangs are at his neck. And that is the end for Artificer Lyth. I hobble back to Dad and drop the Artificer's gaping skull at his feet. Dad nods approvingly and gently scratches my ears like old times. His jovial camaraderie belies a deep concern for my condition. I am brave and try not to signal the graveness of my injuries or how much I suffer. We must hurry, for the commotion will soon draw the attention of the Guard and loose ends yet dangle.

We limp and stagger and redouble our pace through these secret ways.

Emperor Trajan reclines within his vasty solar. Dad has chosen this moment well, for the Emperor is inclined to sleep late after titanic debaucheries. Our leader is alone save for drugged slaves and a handful of Praetorian guards—only select favorites are permitted access to his person at these revelries. Sadly, these dregs are mixed with two or three men who have served honorably. There is nothing for it, however. I lick my wounds as Dad makes his preparations to seal our fates as traitors or liberating heroes.

Dad has brought several terrible weapons, which he activates from the safety of a hidden nook. Soldiers are obliterated where they stand and soon the Emperor has been stripped of his final layer of security. Dad takes a moment to ensure the great obsidiron doors are sealed. It will require technicians with plasma torches many minutes to breach them.

To slay Trajan would be simple. His eyes are glass, he snores. He is unaware of the carnage at his feet; he is oblivious to Dad's looming presence. His slaves suffer from a similar malaise, sprawled about his dais, twitching with visions of erstwhile heroics.

Yes, to slay Trajan would require a mere gesture. Dad must only slide the knife between his ribs. Yet, he stays his hand and Great Trajan snores on. A dull gonging begins against the massive portals. I imagine the chaos beyond, the panic as the Guard is summoned to breach these gates.

So how now? Dad is vexed and bemused. I cannot help him in this matter, notwithstanding my confusion at his hesitation. The will to stand deserts me. I lie on my side and pant heavily, and encourage him with small whines and groans.

"I have destroyed one emperor," Dad says. "How wrong can a man be? This venal creature deserves the mercy of neither bullet nor blade. I will not stain my honor with his thin claret." His gaze wanders the length of the chamber and alights upon the answer to his dilemma. Nine elaborate cages depend above a steaming mud pit in the southwest quadrant. Nearby is a device that controls the pulleys and wires. This device swings the cages to my level and one by one he inspects them. In eight he discovers limp barbarian corpses, but in the ninth, is a healthy specimen who contrives to

feign death until I bark a warning and Dad bangs the bars, provoking the prisoner to stir.

Wasted from abuse and neglect, the barbarian remains a formidable mass within his prison. He reeks of righteous malice. Dad smiles at him and burns the lock half through with his gladius. The barbarian observes with hateful stoicism. His tribe plot devilry and vengeance unto their last exhalation. Their clans war in family units. Doubtless it has been his brothers and sisters boiled in these cages. I smell the pungent rage he experiences regarding the fates of his kinsmen.

Dad does not speak the barbarian tongue. Thus, he makes his intention clear with a casual glance toward the Emperor. Then he drops the gladius and walks away. It would require scant effort for a beast such as this imprisoned warrior to fling his bulk against the lock and be free to raven throughout the peaceful solar. Who knows what havoc he might wreak before the Praetorians gain entrance.

The portals tremble as tremendous efforts begin upon them in earnest. Still faint; there is much time as time goes. Farewell, my Emperor. I think the kid we met in the mountains will do fine in your absence.

Dad makes a travois of his cloak and wraps me in its folds. I protest—he must abandon me to my end and save himself. He doesn’t listen. He has spoken, usually when drunk, of the primordial pact between man and dog. The pact has existed since men squatted in caves by their fires. Man and dog have been pack since we were more troglodyte, since we were more wolf.

We depart. Of course, this is a relative term. There is nowhere to go.

11.

Because he was beloved before he earned the title of tyrant, the old Emperor’s tomb is a grandiose complex of marble. It is built upon a hill not far from where Dad derailed his train as he escaped from Prime. Wildflowers sprinkle the terraces. The old Emperor’s statue rises above the mausoleum dome and its stony eyes do not meet Dad’s when he kneels to offer his respects.

I lie nearby, swaddled and if not peaceful, resigned. I press my snout to Mom's white kerchief that Dad took from his pocket to dab the gore draining from me. He whispers that I should go on ahead and clear the way, I am a good dog and he loves me. I breathe Mom's perfume. She is here, her scent stronger than any dim memory of my own canine mother or littermates. She strokes my heaving ribs. Her touch is soft.

Dad's weapons are spread beside me in a fan. Even now my mind ticks with possibilities. Is there any strength left in these bones? Could I summon a last effort to fight at Dad's side when the Legion comes to snuff him for our treason?

Grassy fields curve unto sky notched by clouds. Somewhere the metropolis buzzes and wasps boil from the hive. At last I observe tiny shadow flickers of gliders and kites between the seam of heaven and earth. I imagine Marcello's colors among the van. They search in swooping patterns that will soon intersect our hill.

The sun is warm on my muzzle. I drowse.

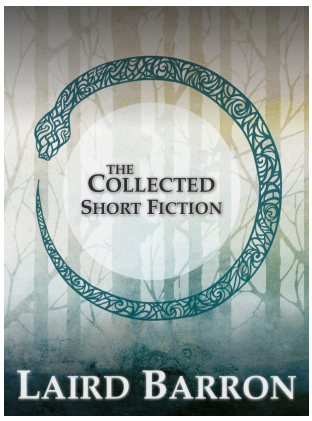
A stag appears in the field below. He coughs a challenge and nods his majestic skull. He gives me an insolent flick of his stub tail and eases toward the tall grass. Instinct, oh she truly is a bitch, and I'm on my feet in pursuit.

Pain swells, then recedes. My gait steadies. I breathe deeply of grass and musk. The breeze quickens and the sky dulls. Snow begins to fall. Soon, the stag has vanished. His tracks are swallowed in white drifts. The grass freezes like blades of upright knives.

I don't know how long this goes on. I wander for hours, for days, for ages. Long enough that I forget what drew me here or where I've been. The dark and the cold and the wind and my loneliness are everything. I hear a voice from afar and my ears prick up. The voice of the wind calls my name and draws me to a hill of ice and stone. Ruddy light glimmers from within the mouth of a cave. I smell cooking meat. The two sides of my dog's mind have a skirmish.

In the end, I creep forward. Smells good. I'll go inside and see what's there. Perhaps I'll warm myself by the fire.

Don’t Make Me Assume My Ultimate Form



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Polychromatic Mercy

Before you become Dee Dee Gamma, before the Black Kaleidoscope takes over your existence, you are Delia Dolores Andersen and you specialize in knocking over jewelry stores. Today will be your last day on the job. Your head swivels and that serves nothing, spares you nothing as your partner, a brute, points her gun at the jeweler and squeezes the trigger. A bullet punches into the jeweler’s forehead. The pistol vibrates. The frame drags, almost disintegrates into cigarette burns, and then steadies. Words and sound synchronize.

What you’re thinking at this moment is primitive and inchoate as the explosion of chemicals and electrified neurons through your system. The thought is as elastic as all of time and space, and like the contrail of the reflexive act, it hangs in your mind in the gulf between, *Don’t touch that alarm, you stupid sonofabitch*, and, *Sweet Jesus, oh, fuck. Willa killed him.* That’s right, you forgot for a moment, your partner’s name is Willa. An Iowa girl, a Star Wars action figure collector, overweight and undereducated, childlike in her emotional incapability. She appears baffled at the report and the jeweler sprawled on the floor.

Now you’ve got the case with the diamonds and you’re cat-footing through the ghost-lighted lobby for the doors. You stepped in blood to collect the prize and you leave a trail.

The driver rolls up to the curb in a Maserati. She pegs it zero to sixty before you get buckled. The vista of glass shop fronts, sidewalk cafés,

alleyways, and cross streets blurs, reverses into sequoias, swamps, the mists of prehistory and bubbling lava. Keep rewinding. An old star burst into a fountain of gamma rays about a hundred million years ago. That cosmic lance has crossed an infinity of cold and darkness to pierce the sunroof, the dome of your skull, and your brain. Cells roil and transform in squamous panic. Decades of your allotted mortal span are reduced to a handful of years. Every tick of the second-hand is emphasis.

Your consciousness untethers from its flesh and rises above the car for a fraction of a millisecond that lasts closer to an eon. The universe fractures into a blizzard of eternally replicating slivers of ice. Images are imprinted within the slivers. You see men with automatic weapons. A wound drips in a magenta sky. You behold with the searing clarity of an X-ray the new ravenous companion that has taken root in your gray matter.

You will never be alone again. That realization is terrifying. You feel nothing, however. You remain numb, even when it all begins to come true.

Mrs. Shrike

Seven months into a twenty-year stretch in a Spanish prison, a chick from way back in high school visits your cell. She apparates between skull-shattering migraines.

Norse: “Hi, I’m Indra Norse. Mrs. Shrike thought a friendly face might cheer your gloomy ass up.” Afro, shooting glasses, gold jumpsuit, utility belt with a black sunburst buckle, and combat boots. She looks different than the demure schoolgirl you knew in Alaska. Faster.

You remember her instantly because she’d been the smartest girl in the room. Her names fascinated you. Indra is a male god and Norse seems an odd surname for an African American family. You also recall that speculating on the subject is a sure-fire way to get punched in the mouth.

Norse: “Two options, Dee Dee. Run away with me to the circus or rot here. Option one, I return in twenty-four hours with all the papers to make you a free woman. Only catch, you gotta repay the debt. We’ll talk about that later. Option two, I hope you are happy with the roaches.”

You don’t require twenty-four hours to weigh the merits. She gives them to you anyway. She asks how the migraines are as she watches you dress in clean traveling clothes. No fancy jumpsuit for you. Later, perhaps. Your own questions are deflected—who, what, why?

Norse: “The spirits aren’t cooperating? Ask the magic eight ball again later. Eat these. Take the edge off those headaches.”

Clean clothes, clean record, passport, and tickets home. Norse’s reference to your heightened powers of perception, which is a secret you’ve not bothered to share with anyone. The FBI is running a game, has to be. *Somebody* is running a game. Life is rigged.

It’s true—pain pills are addicting when you gulp them in bunches. An inoperable brain tumor grows fat and you’ve resigned yourself to the worst. The pills fog your mind too often. Although once matters begin to reveal themselves, you’re actually grateful for the respite from reality. What passes for reality, at any rate.

You: “Where are we going?”

Norse: “The Nest.”

The Nest

The Nest is located in western Washington. *Mrs. Shrike’s Home for Wayward Girls* is how it hits you after you mingle with Norse and the others at Liz Lochinvar’s Bellingham residence. Set among old-growth fir trees and straight out of the 1960s with lots of glass and lots of shag. Jacuzzi, steam room, a wet bar, etcetera, etcetera. Lochinvar, another of your long-lost high school comrades, inherited it from some rich relative and this is where Mrs. Shrike keeps you sharp and ready as a box of knives. You have access to food, weapons, and discretionary funds. Everything except capes and domino masks.

Several women form the heart of the sorority itself. Introductions occur around a coffee table while a grand Pacific Northwest thunderstorm rumbles overhead.

Norse: “Naval Intelligence. Profiler. Authority doesn’t give a damn about ridding the world of evil. I want to burn things down.”

Lochinvar: “Ex-Army. Olympic Judo champeen. Too many rules. Wasn’t suited for it. Not at all.” She smiles at the knife in her callused fist.

Sloan: “Ex-housewife. Alcoholic. Addict. Antisocial. Shrike taught me how to manage my assets. By the way, fuck Judo. Krav Maga all day and all night.” She smiles at Lochinvar. A couple of sweet-faced calendar girls who can tear phonebooks apart with their bare hands.

Mace: “Professional final girl.” Her voice is rough, her neck is scarred. She smokes the living shit out of cigarettes. She wears a bunch of fighting rings. A tattoo of binary code runs along her left forearm. The Zeroes and Ones spell REX. He’s dead.

You: “I’m a career criminal. I’m dying.”

Norse: “Dying? Dying? Bitch, we’re survivors.”

Sloan: “Survivors—for now.”

Lochinvar: “It doesn’t matter a rat’s ass what we *were*. Now we’re the point of the spear. Now we are the first cohort. What scales you ain’t shed from your old life, will fall real soon.”

Sloan: “The legionary first cohort of ex-girlfriends.” She whacks her bottle of Rolling Rock against Norse’s.

You: “Groovy digs, to be sure, and the company is pleasant—”

Mace: “She wants to know why we’ve been gathered here today…” She’s half in the bag, which proves to be a routine condition.

You: “Point of the spear? That’s not phallic or anything.”

Sloan: “We’re down with phallic metaphors, and phalluses.”

Norse: “*Some* of us are down.”

Lochinvar: “We are a privately funded clandestine civilian agency. Certain elements within local and federal law enforcement and military organizations are aware of our existence. Some of these tolerate us, assist us on occasion. Mostly we’re on our own.”

Norse: “We fight evil.”

You: “Specifically?”

Norse: “We rescue kittens from trees.”

Sloan: “We help old ladies cross the street.”

Norse: “No job is too large, no need too small.”

Lochinvar: “The other day I personally annihilated a cult that wanted to revive mass sacrifice to open a wormhole to deep space in somebody’s basement. Next week it could be some asshole has figured a way to construct a pocket-sized death-ray.”

Mace: “Or the kitten will be up another tree.”

Sloan: “We ennoble the downtrodden and defame the wicked. We set fires, we bat our eyes, and we get the last word. Whatever it takes.”

Norse: “You just never know what will happen when you jump out a bed in the morning. Shrikes have all kinds of fun.”

You nurse your near-beer and search their faces for the joke or the con. None of them give a damn about your skepticism. The easy camaraderie and devilish smiles aren’t the kind a woman can fake. Their gallows humor and haunted glances are sharp enough to cut right through your cynicism. These are condemned souls hatching doomed escape plans while the firing squad assembles. If your foot wasn’t already in the grave you might worry more. You wonder about frying pans and fires.

Norse squeezes your hand and your apprehensions are overcome.

X

The stories are similar for the others who inhabit the Nest, the girls who come and go on mysterious errands and sometimes disappear without a forwarding address. Each of you has a purpose, a function within a great complicated pattern. Nine is the current magic number of the roster of your all-girls club. There were eleven as recently as last week; circumstances are such that membership fluctuates. Although the core of the team hails from Alaska, none of you calls it home for one reason or another. The last frontier is a magnet that draws against the metal in your blood and you’ll head back soon enough, ready or not.

Cryptic histories and gallows humor to the contrary, not all of you are damned. Far less melodramatic. However, *you* are and that’s why everybody smiles like you’re a puppy with cancer, except you’re a thirty-

something ex-con with cancer. You're happy to have a job. Each of you has one individual to thank for this newfound lease on life.

You refer to your benefactor as The Old Woman in the Mountain. The connotations are evident upon consideration of your group's favorite problem-solving methods. You also refer to her as Mrs. Shrike because that's the long-defunct company name graven into the serial plate on the underside of the midnight-blue phone. Shrikes are beautiful and cruel. The universe, blind, insensate, and implacable, understands perfectly.

The Old Woman represents an enigma. The fact you can't turn the Black Kaleidoscope her direction is troubling. Who is she? A do-gooder tycoon? The mouthpiece of a multinational corporation? A government shill pulling strings for murky objectives? Lochinvar and Mace allegedly have the most insight. Too bad they aren't talking. The name of the game is trust, although blind faith seems more apt. Bottom line, you placed your bet. Let it ride.

You and Norse aren't present when Lochinvar unlocks the sacred gun safe (a rusty and verdigris-stained Diebold hulk with skulls and crossbones painted on the side) and makes the ritual call on the midnight-blue rotary. You get an earful soon after. Lochinvar convenes an emergency session to discuss the options. She drops the blinds and puts on the lamp with the crimson shade; transforms the furnished basement into a bunker where generals have gathered to decide between DEFCON 2 or DEFCON 1.

Word is, X must be retrieved or else. *Or else* could indicate the assassination of a world leader, the end of an era, or the fiery demolition of planet Earth. *Or else* covers a spectrum of unpleasant possibilities.

Once X is secured, further instructions will follow. The main problem confronting the group is that none of you know what X represents. The basic idea seems to be this person or item currently resides in a ghost town in Alaska and that you'll recognize X when you see it. Are missions always this ambiguous? That would explain why Lochinvar brought you into the fold despite your violent misdeeds and how much fixing it took to cover your tracks.

The other girls want to draw lots, throw dice, or knives, go two out of three falls. This case is special. *You* are uniquely suited for the business at hand—the mind control lessons are paying off. Most importantly, the Old Woman

in the Mountain informs Lochinvar and Sloan that it must be you, no substitutions. This is your trial by fire, Gamma. The first mission is a blooding and it is traditionally done solo. Mace and Lochinvar explain that they'll run interference and direct the opposition's attention elsewhere and give you the best chance possible. However, this first go-around, you're on your own with everything to prove.

To be accepted by the team, to become part of something larger than yourself… You need it to fill your hollow core. Time surely isn't on your side. In the face of imminent extinction, no risk is too great for a shot at redemption. Whatever threat lurks in the great white north can't be worse than the miserable existence you've put in the rearview nor the malignancy of your traitor cells. The others laugh at this naïveté. Mace and Lochinvar, despite their scars and their notoriety, laugh the loudest. Their bitterness raises the hair on your neck. In that moment your friends aren't soft or warm or jocular. No longer are they sarcastic ex-college girls gone a little wrong, lounging in bathing suits, indolent from wine. They are druidesses, naked but for antlers and red ochre, obsidian daggers raised high against the black supermoon, as they loom over the sacrificial slab and you squirming there.

You smile as the fantasy bursts. A weak smile because you're never sure anymore. Could be in another reality, a previous incarnation, wherein Mrs. Shrike's crew ate human hearts and trilled Aztec death whistles.

Sloan believes the effort is fruitless and that it will end in all your deaths. She's a gleeful pessimist. Mace says it doesn't much matter, win or lose. She's even more of a pessimist. Neither of them are talking about your impending trip into the north, they're referring to the big picture.

Norse: "May as well be me. Spare new girl the pain."

Sloan: "Nuh-uh." She flexes her biceps. "It should be me *and* thee. Could be an occasion for violence. Home girl's soft. We're the violent ones."

Lochinvar: "You smack-talkin' bitches need to stifle yourselves." Her cool glare shuts them right down. She takes her orders directly from the Old Woman. The Old Woman calls the shots and she has spoken. That makes you the It Girl.

Plans are laid. The point of no return zooms past.

Go North, Young Woman

The going-away ceremony is a barbeque on a beach near the Nest. Lochinvar's a disco fanatic. She lugs a record player and a portable generator to the event; broadcasts the hot '70s beats on scratched vinyl. Neither KC nor his entire Sunshine Band help to dispel the mood of impending doom. The driftwood blaze isn't merry either, it's a Roman Legion bonfire on the eve of a massacre.

Everybody kisses your cheek, except for Norse who goes for a little more. Mace hugs you and whispers to check the drop box in Palmer; she's sent ahead her second-favorite holdout knife. In the morning you're gone and the cabal of kick-ass bitches, the voice on the midnight-blue rotary in the gun safe, and all the rest, recede into the province of dream and delusion.

There's a three-and-a-half-hour flight from SeaTac to Anchorage, Alaska. The easy part. From Anchorage, you drive. The rental is dinged in all four panels, its windshield is cracked. Duct tape on the gear shift. You swing through Palmer and visit the apartment of your contact, a sympathizer. A bland woman in a red bathrobe with a heron stitched to the breast mutes her soap opera to answer the door. She doesn't ask questions. She hands you a key and points to a metal box in her shoe closet. Inside that box there are three burner cell phones, an atomizer of compressed acid (with Mr. Yuck stickers plastered to the barrel), a set of topographical maps, and, tucked into a manila folder, fifteen hundred dollars in assorted bills and a nine-inch commando knife attached to a sticky note emblazoned by a lipstick kiss. Thanks, Mace.

The real driving begins.

Alaska is emptiness ringed in prehistoric fangs. This is the season of mosquitos and thunderstorms. The sun never completely sets. Red skies. Wetlands, peckerwood forest, and mountains keep going and going whichever way you turn your head. The sea gleams harsh as chipped glass, but you haven't seen it since you pushed inland. Mace claims sleeping on a boat brings the weirdest dreams. She'd know.

Green earth gives way to tundra and shale. Towns lie in strips. Roads are geometric slashes radiating from the carven visage of a forsaken god's

skull. Summer is eighty-seven days long. Dust cakes the windows of the shops and of the cars. Beams of sunlight and headlights through the dusty windows intersect as rays of mud.

You pop a ball of chocolate caffeine. Trucker-strength, goddamnit. Onward and onward.

Poor men are made of mud. Said Tennessee Ernie Ford. He also said a rich man has blue in his blood. When the blue is black and black is mud that pours from incandescent clouds and caged filaments and oozes like tar from opened flesh, you will have arrived at the great X burned into the map. You will stand in the mud-light, buried like a flint arrowhead, in the heart of the X. Eventually the habitations of men fall away and there are no other vehicles. The land aches. It doesn't want you around either. You're the grain of irritating insignificance in the flesh of the oyster.

Onward and onward until the radio grinds static and ravens glide overhead. Signs warn against trespassing before they disappear.

Murdockville is the ghost of a mining town a corporation laid out seventeen years ago at the height of a boom. No one has lived here in fourteen. Sadly, the mine went bust and the brand spanking new facilities were evacuated overnight. Tundra and earthquakes and relentless north winds are returning the place to dirt, one roof tile, one brick, one smashed window at a time. Summer, and thank the powers for that much. This will be no place for a human being when winter howls down from the snowy range.

You've traveled through dust and darkness to claim your prize, to grasp Fate by the throat. Yours is the gift of second sight. Premonition, clairvoyance, telepathy, woman's intuition. Whatever it is, it's not reliable enough to break the bank in Vegas. Weak and intermittent as a radio broadcast that can only be received under perfect atmospheric conditions, it has led you in fits and starts to these modern ruins lost within the ancient wilderness.

The Old Woman in the Mountain says the prize will be subtle, yet obvious. Your choices inside this shelled-out room in an abandoned rec center boil down to either a jukebox, a buckshot blast pattern through a corkboard bulletin board, or the bundle of rags and wooden sticks cast aside in the

corner. The bundle proves to be an Edgar Allan Poe puppet. Two feet long; the puppet's colors are faded bronze flecked black, its skull is deformed, and its prim black suit hangs in cerement tatters. Its strings are clipped and its mustache is clotted from a nosebleed. One cockeye peers, cold as the permafrost. The other eye is a ragged hole. Behold a simulacrum of Poe, dead from booze and rabies and after the vermin have had at his face.

You don't want to believe that you've seen this puppet. Your sister, Harmony, owned several marionettes when you were girls. Poe, an astronaut, a Punch puppet, and others. Harmony wasn't skilled in puppetry; she enjoyed flailing her troupe across makeshift stages in skits she learned while watching *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. Teen years (boys, cliques, and a new car!) arrived and those puppets went into a Salvation Army bin. Yet here Poe is, the once pallidly morose creature who resided on a shelf above Harmony's bed. Pallid moroseness has progressed to disease and horror.

First prize, indeed.

Poe Boy

Poe says, "Humans are not inevitable, Annabel. You used the Black Glass to find me. An unwise course. Exceedingly." The puppet's voice is cultured, yet rough, and far from the mannered Victorian accent your subconscious might be expected to affect. This is closer to your grandfather's voice, or how you imagine it after these many years.

A lesser soul would scream and hurl the puppet aside. You are made of heavier metal; one flinch and a strangled cry of surprise is the extent of your concession to civilian frailty. The puppet's lips don't move, the first clue this is a hallucination or a miracle. You would love to believe you've acquired super powers manifesting as psychokinesis or full-on telepathy, however it seems more probable that the brain tumor is finally impinging upon something vital, as promised. Migraines, nosebleeds, hallucinations; none of it is promising. Puppets don't speak of their own accord and that means you've elevated the art of the interior monologue to a new level.

You: "The Old Woman says that." You set Poe in the passenger seat. The trunk would seem more plausible, except you decide to keep the puppet near, like a proper enemy.

Poe: “Does she? Lochinvar *claims* to speak to her.”

You: “Maybe I should tape your mouth.”

Poe: “I’ve seen hell, Ann.” He pronounces *Ann* with a sneer.

You: “My friends will want to hear all about it.”

Poe: “It is not inevitable that you will meet them again.”

You turn the key in the ignition and nothing happens. You unwrap another caffeine pill and eat it, slowly crumple the foil and its hornet graphic. Wind pushes against the car. Directly before you, the skeletal frame of a radio tower trembles. To your left lies a row of low buildings with boarded windows and tan doors, sealed tight against the elements. On your right, across a tussock field, spreads a disjointed landscape of alder thickets and marsh. Hills rise and rise. It is late afternoon and the sun is a blade stabbing toward the mountains. You dial the special number and let the machine record, then disconnect. Waiting is the hardest part is right.

The burner phone hums. It’s Lochinvar.

Lochinvar: “What you got, girl?” After you describe the situation and your acquisition, she says to hang tight. Minutes pass. “Has it said anything?” Her tone is different.

You: “The puppet?”

Lochinvar: “Has it spoken? This is important.”

You: “It’s not that kind.”

Lochinvar: “All puppets are that kind. This… puppet was abandoned in New York State ten years ago. Now it’s hiding out in Tumbleweed, Alaska. Hell of a migration.”

You: “Someone obviously—”

Lochinvar: “Someone obviously my ass. Has it spoken or not?”

You: “No.” You massage your skull even though the pain hasn’t started. You don’t need second-sight to detect the edge in her voice. She’s been on the horn with the Old Woman, getting the signals.

Lochinvar: “All right. Thank god.”

You: “Why thank god?” You straighten in the seat and regard your little buddy.

Lochinvar: “Mrs. Shrike says if it’s quiet, you’re still in the green.”

You: “Oh. I probably don’t want to explore the implications.”

Lochinvar: “Correct, you do not. Keep X under direct supervision. Get home.”

After Lochinvar has gone you chuck the phone and hit the ignition. No joy.

Poe: “Scary music and car troubles mean only one thing.”

You study the surroundings. The hand of darkness is slipping ever closer.

You: “We’ve got the place to ourselves, Eddie. We’re in the green.”

Poe: “Why’d you lie to your pal?”

You: “I didn’t lie.”

Poe: “You lied your lips off.”

You: “We aren’t having this conversation. You’re an aural hallucination precipitated by my terminal decline. And shut up.”

Poe: “Please, put me back.” The puppet’s head slips, so its remaining eye fixes on you.

You: “I’ve driven all this way. C’mon.”

Poe: “You’ve never killed. You’re not the same as the other girls. You don’t have the guts. Please put me back. It’s going to get me. You led it here. Please, please, please.”

You: “Nevermore.”

Poe: “Fool! The car isn’t going to start. I’m dead. The Eater of Dolls is coming.”

You: “Shut up, Eddie.” After a deep breath, you try, try again and the engine catches, praise the powers above and below.

Poe: “Oh no oh no oh no.” Then the puppet laughs.

You’ve heard that sound. Once when the doctor called to say your mother’s cancer, and now *your* cancer, had done its work. You heard it again when your old golden retriever cried once in the night as she was going, gone. You heard it during an adventurous youth, moments before the thin ice of a lake cracked beneath your boots. You heard it last when a kid from Indiana, a Star Trek fanatic, cocked the hammer of a pistol.

You rev the engine and roll.

Black Kaleidoscope

Chocolate speedballs can only take a woman so far and no farther. Pricks of fire float upon the eternal Alaska summer twilight and resolve to the streetlamps and illuminated shops of a town. You fuel the car at a Tesoro and roll into a flophouse motel. Your watch says it's a quarter until nine. Exhaustion weighs your skull like an iron ball. Three or four hours sleep to recharge the batteries, then you'll hit the trail again and press on to Anchorage. Food can wait, a shower can wait. Sleep is what you yearn for.

Poe: "Dear Ann, this isn't a good idea." The puppet tries to sound reasonable, avuncular. "Keep trucking, sister. It wants you to stop. It wants to catch us."

You tuck Poe under your arm and go into the cheap, claustrophobically narrow room. Mold, sweat, smoke, a hint of whorish perfume. Water stains and AC on the fritz. TV works fine, though.

You: "Hey, *Lamb Chop* reruns!" You click and click the remote, hunting for some porno.

Poe: "Stopping is bad." The puppet lies primly in its nest on the opposite bed. The table lamp bathes it with a cancerous glow. "In these situations, stopping is always the worst thing you can do."

You: "Short of fucking outside of wedlock, right? Does masturbation count? Because I plan to rub one out and cash in for the night. I can't see straight enough to avoid the ditch. Free skin flicks and a soft mattress win."

Despite your bravado, you lock the door and block it with a coffee table. A peek through moth-eaten blinds apprises you that the parking lot is mostly empty, and no one stirring except a drunk in shredded fatigues collapsed near the PEPSI machine by the manager's office.

You: "There. You're safe from The Eater of Dolls. Wake me up if he, er, it, comes knocking."

You swallow pills to dull the spike traveling through your skull, dim the lamp, and lie propped against the headboard while spray-tanned actors undulate perfunctorily on the television screen. The next click of the remote

takes you back and back to a shirtless Danzig performing “How the Gods Kill.”

Poe: “You’re a doll.” Its tone is petulant and sinister. “It will like you too.”

You: “Be quiet. You’re pissed because somebody snipped your strings. For a marionette that’s like getting turned into a eunuch, right?”

Poe refuses to dignify that crack with a reply. You feel the puppet’s anger seething, nonetheless.

You haven’t dreamed in years. When your eyes close and your consciousness dissipates, it funnels into the barrel of what the eggheads, Toshi and Campbell, who work for Mrs. Shrike, call the Black Kaleidoscope. Quantum location and temporal fragmentary acquisition and dilation is a mouthful. Itty bitty time molecules get snagged in the sieve of your ultra-powerful, ultra-sensitive subconscious and translated into occasionally useful psychic imagery. It feels a hell of lot like astral projection from the way generations of hippies and crystal-loving earth mothers have described gliding along at the whip end of a silver cord. The main difference is, you don’t zoom through a gulf of mist and light; you submerge into the black tar between blazing stars, the infinite Lagerstätte where consciousness goes to die. The ichor of the cosmos drowns your senses.

… Your father folds his arms and stares into the sunset. He never hugged you, never hugged your mother or sister. He backhanded you once, for coming home after curfew with your hair mussed and lipstick smeared. He apologized and apologized and pressed an icepack to your cheek. Last time he ever touched you…

… The Maserati careens into a cow pasture. Spanish cops with automatic weapons fill the car with holes, your accomplices with more holes. You surrender peacefully, like the coward you are… A Spartan cell, iron cot, a corroded toilet, trained cockroaches to keep you company…

… Norse caresses your cheek. “Did you have the sight when you were small, or did it develop after you got sick?” *You can’t remember not possessing some form of the sight. You don’t know if non-memory is true memory. The Black Kaleidoscope has a tendency to overwrite your mind. For example, it helps you forget that Harmony was driving the getaway car*

and how, after the third or fourth bullet, her face relaxed until it assumed a puppet's perfectly lifeless expression.

… Lochinvar drags on a joint, although her expression remains severe. She struggles to explain how the team receives assignments; it's cryptic—Mrs. Shrike is a facilitator; she doesn't tell her girls everything. Some of it they must learn for themselves. "We use auguries," *Lochinvar says*. "Tea leaves, pigeon guts, the stock market. Tarot cards. Fortune cookies. Crazier than that."

"Brute force," *you say and decline the joint when she tries to pass it to you.* "What's it all about?"

"Survival. Living to fight another day. We'll see where it goes from there…"

… Ants mobilize in the depths to invade rival colonies. The quiet slaughter that ensues dwarfs all the wars of men combined… Giant wasps float down from the spreading shadows of the canopy to assault a honeybee fortress, and again, the carnage is numbing…

… In the rearview as you bail out of Murdockville, the doors of the deserted buildings swing open, one after another in a domino chain…

… Poe tumbles through darkness, limbs jostling, wrapped in a feeble halo of light, dissolving. "Oh dear Annabel. It's your fault she's dead. She was the good girl." *You want to defend yourself. Harmony was a grown woman. She chose to roll the bones and they came up snake-eyes. Words remain impossible. You howl in grief instead. Poe can't hear you. Your sister can't hear you either. They're out there, zipping farther into the great dark…*

… Meanwhile, something is coming up from behind. You glance over your shoulder…

The Eater of Dolls

You come to around midmorning. No one murdered you in the night and that wipes the slate. You check in with Lochinvar. She's unhappy, says to decamp and get driving. Pain pills and breakfast are in order. Your head and stomach conspire to heap misery upon you.

There’s a lounge three blocks from the motel. The lounge is arranged similar to those rococo establishments that were popular in the ’60s and ’70s when your parents dragged you along for breakfast before church. Heavy paneling and dark, heavy furniture that invite gloom. Thick glass ashtrays. The host herds you into the smoking section despite your muttered protestations. He seems fearful.

Pancakes, eggs, coffee. Your waitress is haggard. You wonder if she stayed up late watching porn too. You have to wonder because your talent is more remote-viewing than ESP. Her nametag says CRO. She stares at your forehead, your shoulder, Poe canted against the opposite side of the booth, everywhere but your eyes.

The coffee is bitter. It’s daylight, barely, and the place is half full of truckers and the jocular plaid and Carhart workaday set.

Two young women occupy a booth closer to the entrance. Tourists like yourself. Unlike you, the pair wear slinky dresses glittering with sequins, long white gloves (more sequins), and expensive hairdos. The brunette faces the door. The nape of her neck curves most shapely. The blonde is sharp-featured in a way that some women find repulsively attractive. Her lipstick lends the illusion she’s been sipping at the neck of a slaughtered gazelle. She smiles and sips orange juice, extra-large. She isn’t wearing jewelry. Hmm. What to make of that?

The Black Kaleidoscope grinds inside your skull. Crystalline flakes of potentiality quiver, seeking to coalesce into concrete knowledge—all the knowledge that exists exists in the cosmic tar of your subconscious, if only you’ll stare deeper… You fight the compulsion. Too much pain this early in the morning.

Poe “Oh.” It has remained inert until this moment. “No. No.”

The blonde peels the glove from her right hand. Her hand hasn’t seen the sun in a while. It belongs to an older, emaciated person. Still smiling (the painted sneer of a manikin), she reaches under the table and you freeze with a premonition of impending awfulness—she’s going to whip out a gun or a bomb or some other lethal device. If only you’d brought one of your own; if only Norse or Sloan were here. Either of them would be ready for an action

scene. Mace would've, as the group's wise Odysseus figure, plotted an escape route and a plan to burn the lounge to cinders in her wake.

Instead of a submachine gun or a grenade, the blonde retrieves a dummy clad in a lumpy silver spacesuit and balances it on the edge of the table. The dummy's face is white and mottled as boiled flesh, lacking ears, eyes, and nose. Of course the dummy is faceless; without a helmet, one unguarded glance at the sun burned it away. Its mouth makes a tiny sphincter about the size of a woman's fingertip. Its left arm rises and gauntleted fingers waggle a greeting.

Poe: "The Eater of Dolls." The puppet speaks with awe.

You: "What the hell is going on?" Surely it would be nice to ask someone other than a puppet. The waitress moves among the tables, she and her patrons apparently oblivious to the Moulin Rouge hot chicks and the world's most hideous dummy.

Poe: "As You Know Bob. What in the name of the Dark have they done? Bob used to be a marionette. Bob was my friend."

Bob: "Edgar. Edgar. Edgar. Edgar. Edgar. I'm still your friend. Edgar." Bob's sucker mouth dilates. Its voice is husky and feminine and carries intimately—or, as must be the case, the blonde's delivery is theater-caliber. "I've searched and searched for you. I'm your friend, Edgar. I'm." As the dummy speaks, its soft material bulges and darkens where the eyes should be. Yes, darkens like blood seeping through cloth.

Poe: "Oh no oh no oh no." Again with the jagged laugh.

Bob: "Oh yes, Edgar. Together. You and me. Me."

You're impressed. The dummy's voice is in your ear, yet the blonde's lips don't twitch. She's a master of ventriloquism.

The waitress's head snaps around. She lurches to a halt near your booth. Her expression is going through changes.

Waitress: "Yes, a master of ventriloquism. Yes." Her voice too is husky and feminine and soothing. "Dee Dee Gamma. Leave. Leave the puppet. Leave."

Bob: "I want Poe, only Poe." Its voice harmonizes with the waitress's. "You may leave unharmed if you leave at once. Thank you, Mizz Gamma.

Thank.”

Patrons continue their routines. A trucker tries the door handle several times before he unravels its mystery. Three burly dudes who’ve traded raucous insults for the past twenty minutes lapse into meditative silence. Two of them are poised, cups raised midway. The third drools through a grin, enchanted by some vison.

You intuit what they’re experiencing. The pressure in your head changes. Your nipples stiffen. Warmth suffuses your belly. The harsh dimness of the lounge softens as your mind softens. Your tumor responds to the siren call. That insensate malignancy wants to enter the blonde.

Poe: “—in your mind, Ann!” The puppet’s voice cuts through the drone of your colliding thoughts.

It is enough to snap you back to earth. Around the room, glasses and cups shatter. Cutlery and fragments of porcelain levitate and drift in counterclockwise spirals. The floor trembles. A low rumble begins in the earth.

You rise and snatch Poe and stride toward the entrance. Bob and his two bimbos are between you and the door. The blonde manipulates the dummy, or maybe the other way around. The brunette rises to block the way. She’s as pretty as a rabid fox. You palmed the atomizer in your left hand. She’s wearing sunglasses, but her nostrils flare when you jam the nozzle in her face. She sits again, with alacrity. Good girl.

Ten steps gets you inside your car and the doors locked. As the key turns, you sense a malevolent presence traveling through the wires. You exert your will. The engine fires on the first try.

You: “Ed, what do I win if I get you back to civilization?” You drive across a concrete divider and smash through a ditch onto the road. Your mother raced Baja in the late ’70s. She taught you how to handle a car.

Poe: “A tattoo of a shrike somewhere inconspicuous and the satisfaction of a job well done.”

Ninety degree left, and you sideswipe a street sign. The passenger window cracks. Needle pegs eighty-five.

You: “Satisfaction, huh? Well, I always meant to get a tat before I died.”

Poe: “Your girls think I know details about the enemy. They’re wrong. Bob can’t be stopped. Bob’s master can’t be stopped. I can’t save any of you. I’m sorry, Annabel. I’m sorry it’s going to eat us.”

You: “The dummy isn’t going to eat us.”

Poe: “Bob isn’t a dummy. Bob is a shell that contains awfulness.”

You locate the last burner phone and dial Lochinvar. Ring, ring, ring. You attempt to project your mind’s eye three thousand miles east where your comrades doubtless gather at the Nest. Two problems—first, serious meditative concentration is difficult under these circumstances; second, poisonous psychic vapors roil around the car. You own personal acid rain cloud, courtesy of the dummy and its girls.

Full tank of gas, mountains on every side. You’re traveling through a valley, perhaps the original Valley of Death the Good Book made famous. Inside an hour this surface road will intersect a major highway and from there it’s three hundred and twenty miles to Anchorage. At the moment, those times and distances feel as if you’re in a space capsule plotting a course for Alpha Centauri. Long, long way and the landscape creeps by too slowly.

You make it another seventeen miles.

Kiss of the Psychopomp

Every light and dial on the dashboard goes bonkers. A whisper tickles your inner ear. Marilyn Monroe speaking from the grave? Guttural and alluring and incomprehensible, although the sense of threat is plain, the voice initmates you should pull over before it’s too late. *This* is why the Old Woman sent you. She’d known the tricks the enemy would deploy. The other Shrikes possess a capacity for violence that dwarfs your own. You’re a thrill-seeker, not a killer. Yet, you are the only one who can access the Black Kaleidoscope, and that is the ace of spades in your back pocket.

The devil’s breath is hot in your mind, but you push the whisper aside and block the image of a giant silver figure striding across the hills to squash the car into a blob. You also block corresponding images of everyone you’ve

ever loved dying hideous deaths, of the Earth blackening as a leaf blackens in a flame.

Your enemies decide there are other ways to skin a cat, obviously.

The radiator boils over. You forge ahead in a cloud of steam and smoke. The trunk springs open, then shears away and bounces on the pavement. The rear passenger door goes next. The rear passenger tire blows and you do some fancy steering to keep from wrecking. You know it's over but for the crying.

So does Poe. The puppet moans prayers in what you guess to be Old English.

A metallic glint appears in the rearview and begins to chew the gap; it's a black Lincoln roaring at one hundred and twenty, easy. Late '80s model. Heavy as a tank. Intuition suggests the blonde is driving, sneering as she closes the distance.

That last high-speed pursuit in Spain is on your mind. It didn't end well. They seldom do. You grit your teeth and spin the wheel until the other vehicle is in the bull's-eye of your hood ornament.

You: "Guess what, bitches? I'm the last person on Earth you want to play chicken with." You drift into the left lane and gradually press the pedal to floor. Euphoria, better than any dope, carries you away in the split instant that the enemy driver loses her nerve and tries to veer aside and your bumper annihilates everything in its path.

Hell of a crackup. The airbag does its thing, although there's a lot of blood leaking through your pants leg and from your busted nose. Your car lands in the ditch. It's totaled. You escape the wreckage, Poe tucked under your arm like a football. The black sedan has flown off the road and flipped onto its roof near a deserted T intersection. Pieces of metal and glass are scattered along the road.

Poe: "Run run run." It chants in a monotone. "Run, your sister is not far ahead."

Flight is not an option. You're light-headed from blood loss. You hobble to the centerline and take a stand. High noon without a six-shooter. Mace's knife is strapped to your ankle. The thought of bending to draw the blade

wearies you. You've misplaced your purse and the atomizer. A tiny part of you dares hope someone will drive by and report this clusterfuck to the cops. Waves of psychic static break against the bulwark you've raised to protect your will. Animals within the radius of that emanation are curled whimpering their burrows; any human approaching within a mile is sure to find themselves parked and missing a block of time. Whatever Bob and its bimbos are, they've cleared the decks to ensure this is a private affair. It's down to you and a maimed puppet here at the crossroads.

The driver door crushes outward until it clangs wide. The blonde unfolds (you think of her as Betty) and shuffles toward you. Same routine on the other side, and here comes the brunette (Veronica). They stand shoulder to shoulder, twenty feet from where you and Poe grimly await what must transpire.

Their dresses are perfect—the blonde in black, the brunette in white, neither so much as smudged. Dresses perfect, hair un-mussed, the duet did not escape unscathed. Their sunglasses are lost. Both women are lacerated and bruised. The blonde's left leg is shattered. Bones protrude. The brunette's lower jaw hangs by bloody strands. She sways as her comrade sways and that gory jaw is a slow-arcing pendulum across her chest.

This should surprise and horrify you. You chuckle and maybe that's the same.

The Brunette: *Leave the puppet, Ms. Gamma.* Her whisper scratches at your brain. She winks. *Don't make him come out of the car.*

The Blonde: "Leave the puppet, Ms. Gamma." Chipper as hell.

Bob (muffled): *Give me the puppet, Mizz Gamma. Give.* It murmurs these sweet nothings into your other ear in the blonde's voice except accompanied by a split-second image of a thorn tree upon a blasted field beneath a carnivorous red sky. Many severed heads dangle from the tree, their many mouths dripping crimson pulp, the hideous red light of the sky reflecting in their eyes.

The offer is tempting. Hand over Poe, turn away, and limp across the tundra toward the sun that never completely sets during this time of season. Demonic smirks to the contrary, possibly the Muppet sisters are on the level and you'll actually go free. Your mother didn't raise a sucker and it doesn't

matter. Walking away is a fantasy. In a few seconds you'll keel over like road kill. Suck it up, Gamma, this is your moment of truth. You're standing in the fire.

You: "Poe, this is the end of the road, I fear."

Poe: "Gamma, don't. I was born in a studio in New York City in 1929. My father was a carpenter. He emigrated from Poland. He had many children and grandchildren. I was the only marionette he created. His daughter carved Bob in 1970."

You allow Poe to slip from your hand. The puppet goes quiet. Its expression is inanimate. There is nothing of your sister nor yourself within the eroded face, nothing of life in the tangle of disjointed limbs. Still, a pang shoots through you as your boot descends on the puppet's cranium. You stomp twice, to be certain. Murdering the final vestige of your childhood, or brutally putting it out of its misery. Either way, the act drains most of what's left in your tank. You crumple and your pose isn't much different from the ruined marionette.

The women exchange a glance. The blonde covers her mouth. Her grin slides past her fingers. The brunette makes claws of her gloved hands and rakes her hair. Hanks tear free and she gesticulates. She hisses and burbles. It dawns upon you that they approve of your choice.

The Blonde: "There are mistakes, then there are colossal, life-altering blunders." She lowers her arm to reveal a cold, dead expression. "Guess which one you have made?" She gestures at her partner.

The brunette walks to the upended car. She crouches and disappears inside. You think, how phallic, how quiet it is without Poe's company. You wish you weren't falling asleep. Seconds pass. The sky shifts magenta; swaths are rapidly melted through by undulating cigarette burns. Your hands are magenta and covered in amoeba shadows. Your vision grows fuzzy. You rest your head on the centerline, watch the stripe stretch into the magenta gloaming. The asphalt is as soft as that goose-down pillow you had as a kid.

You mistake the screams for a siren. Soon, the screams end and a figure slithers from the wreckage. The figure reflects the colors of this subarctic wasteland and hurts to gaze upon. It expands and contracts, dragging itself

across the road to where you are pawing, too late, for the commando knife. The brunette follows closely.

Bob is missing parts; its mantle is perfect. Bob is coming for you with what it's got. The dummy is no longer a dummy, it has evolved into something old and unspeakable to match its skinned and boiled visage. Right arm torn off in the crash, the sinuous left works fine to lever itself over your body until its sucker lips are poised near your own. You fight. The blonde and brunette step on your wrists.

The Blonde: "Inoperable isn't an obstacle for Bob. He'll fix you, good as new. Ever had psychic surgery, little girl? Get ready."

Bob: "My brother iz spared the worzt. Worzt." Fingers grip your chin and tilt your head. "Inside you iz what I really want. Want. Alwayz wanted *you*, Mizz Gamma. Gamma. Iz why we brought you here. Here. Away from your nest. Nest."

Its mouth opens like an iris and a blood-slick tendril uncoils and descends and penetrates the corner of your eye. Bob licks your right eye out of the socket, crushes and devours that mashed red grape. Magenta brightens and incandesces in a blast of white phosphorous.

Your mind leaps from your thrashing self, breaching sunward. Gravity seizes you, drags you backward. Voices call to one another from the distance, *Inbound, weapons hot.*

—Too late, goddamnit.

—Ninety seconds. She's alive.

—Remember, concentrated fire on the visitor. Burn him down, everybody survives.

—If the dampeners hold. If she's alive.

—Cut the chatter. Eighty seconds.

A wave of screeching static overwhelms your fleeting escape and you plummet to earth.

The wriggling, piercing tongue burrows. The real delicacy is your faithful tumor, uprooted and teased into daylight and sucked segment by necrotic segment into an eager maw. The dummy whipsaws its head, attacking the extrusion of malignant flesh as if it were a string of saltwater taffy. At last

the tumor pops free and is devoured. Bob relaxes its death grip on your jaw and your skull bounces on the pavement.

Bob: “Fear. Guilt. Pain. Ecstazy. Your strength. Your weaknez. Manifezt in cannibal organizm. Thank you, Mizz Gamma. Thank.”

You aren’t fully conscious for this experience. Unfortunately, the Black Kaleidoscope spins wildly of its own volition and you witness these horrors from multiple perspectives.

The blonde lifts Bob into her arms and cradles the dummy with mechanical tenderness. The brunette extends her index finger and examines the long, sharp nail. She smiles and leans toward you, and her torso disintegrates and the rest of her is batted away. The blonde says something to Bob. The dummy is sated and sluggish and too slow to respond.

The blonde inhales to scream. Bob’s mouth dilates. Several laser dots flicker against their bodies, then those bodies are shredded to sawdust and a mist of scorched blood.

A half-track clatters through the hills and rolls up. Sloan is on the .50 caliber gun. Norse and Lochinvar emerge. The women are clad in jumpsuits and headsets. Lochinvar carries a heavy rifle with a scope. She inspects the remains and nods with satisfaction. Apparently, this is a triple-cross. The dummy and its entourage were the targets all along—the Black Kaleidoscope confirms this, a day late and a dollar short, alas. You’d applaud Lochinvar’s ruthlessness if you could muster the strength to raise your voice.

Norse presses her cheek against yours. She smells of grief and adrenaline, but she hasn’t shed a tear. She says she’s got you, that it’s over. You laugh because you know the secret. It’s always only beginning, always only transforming into something worse.

Shrikes

There’s a video locked inside the Diebold gun safe. The video features various Shrike women in candid shots. An off-camera voice greets each woman by name and asks, “Why? Why have you come here? Why have you pledged yourself to Mrs. Shrike?”

You: Pale from months in the cell, scrawny, apprehensive. You wince and rub your temple. Pain radiates from your eyes. “Time is short. I want to make amends. Redemption? Yeah, sure.”

Liz Lochinvar: Surrounded by evergreens, her nose broken and bloodied. Her left forearm is slashed vertically to the crook of her elbow. Exposed metal glistens within the wound. A broadsword rests across her thighs. “Revenge. Man.”

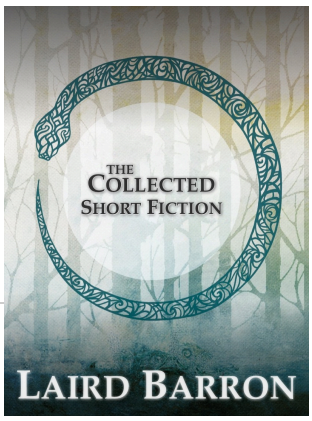
Robin Sloan: Luxuriating in the Jacuzzi, fine as a movie starlet in her string bikini and sunglasses. She raises her left fist to reveal raw and swollen knuckles. “I pulverize cinderblocks with my bare hands. Mrs. Shrike lets me pulverize faces. Boom!”

Indra Norse: Leaning against the hood of a ’68 Mustang. Her jumpsuit is crimson. “Because there’s a war on. It’s as tiny and savage as colonies of insects going at it. I’d rather not be on the side that gets annihilated. But yeah, we’re gonna lose. Wanna fuck?”

Jessica Mace: Bruised cheek, blazing eyes, wild hair, torn jacket. A car is on fire in the background. Instead of speaking, she takes a long, insolent swig from the neck of a whiskey bottle. Her glare holds until the video cuts to black.

Fear Sun

This version taken from *Innsmouth Nightmares*, July 2015
First published in *Innsmouth Nightmares*, July 2015



Click.

Wow, this is exciting.

BOO-ooom! *goes the green-black surf against green-black rocks that jut crookedy-wookedy as the teeth of an English grand-uncle of mine.* FAH-whoom! Ba-room! *go the torpedoes bored into the reef like bullets from God's six-shooter (in this case a borrowed nuclear submarine). Then the dockside warehouses on stilt legs fold into the churning drink. Fire, smoke, death. On schedule and more to come in act two of Innsmouth's destruction. Daddy would have a hard-on for this action. Perhaps, in his frigid semi-after life, he does. I bet he does.*

The red light means it's on, lady. Let's hurry this along. All hell is breaking loose as you can see on the monitors. You don't need the gun, I'll speak into the mike. We've never met, but I know who you are and why you've come. I like you, chick, you've got balls. My advice, run. This won't lead anywhere pleasant. The Black Dog is loping closer. Gonna bite you, babe. Smoke on the water hides worse. Okay, okay, ease back on the hammer, girlfriend. I'll satisfy your curiosity even though you'll be sorry.

Speaking of, mind if I have a cigarette? Judging from your expression, it'll be my last.

Okay, let's start with last night and go from there.

Last evening went much the same as most of my nocturnal expeditions among the locals do: Cocktails and appetizers at the *Harpy's Nest*. Bucket of blood on the Innsmouth docks and the closest thing to a lounge within fifty miles. Lobster entrée, ice cream dessert cake. Karaoke night with the locals, oh Jesus. I totally abhor karaoke. I made fat ass Mantooth get up on

the dais and sweat his way through “Dang Me.” Not bad, not bad. Andi told me that Mantooth graduated from Juilliard’s drama division before he got into the muscle business. Huh. That goon has opened doors and twisted the arms of my stalkers since I escaped college. Surprising that I never knew.

My dress, a Dior original, cut low as sin. Better believe I danced with a whole bevy of rustic lads. The clodhoppers stood in line. Before the bar closed, my ass was bruised from all those clutching oafs and I got a rash from the beards rubbing my neck and tits.

For an encore, I balled a sailor in a shanty. A grizzled character actor named Zed whom the project team recruited from a St. Francis shelter and planted here in 2003. We shared a smoke and he recited the lore of this hapless burg and its doomed inhabitants.

“That’s not the script I gave you.” I stroked his dead white chest hair in warning. My nails alternated between red and black.

“It’s the truth, missy. The devil’s own.” His tone made it evident he hadn’t a clue with whom he conversed. Not a shocker—I eschew the public eye like nobody’s business. It’s also possible the drunken fool believed that theater had become life.

Zed’s perversion of the project script offended me. Granted, I’d done the equivalent of visiting Disney World, fucking Mickey Mouse and getting offended when the dude in the costume refused to break character. Call me fickle. I whistled and the boys waltzed in and beat him with a pipe. Got bored watching him crawl around like a crab with three legs broken. They pinned his arms while I exorcised a few of my demons with a stiletto heel. The actor gurgled and cussed, but he won’t tell. Know why? Because I stuffed a personal check covered in my bloody fingerprints into his shirt pocket. What was on that check? Plenty, although not nearly as much as you’d think.

That’s it for last night. Oh, oh, I had a Technicolor dream. Dream may be the wrong word—I seldom do and anyway, I was awake at the time and staring at the motel ceiling, trying to connect the water stain dots and I closed my eyes for a few seconds and had a vision. I got shrunk to three inches or so tall and Dad’s head loomed above me with the enormity of a Mount Rushmore bust. Icicles dangled from his ears and his flesh cycled

from blinding white, to crimson, to midnight blue as the filament sun downshifted through the color spectrum. Dad said I made him proud and to keep on with the project. *The seas will swallow the earth!* And *All the lights are going out! Beware the ants!* His lips were frozen in place. He boomed his visions telepathically. Reminded me of my childhood.

Oh, Daddy.

Unless you're a well-connected investor or an F.B.I. special agent, you probably haven't heard of my father. His personal wealth exceeded eighty billion before I got my hooks into it as sole beneficiary. Super!

Most of his projects weren't glamorous, and the sexy radio-ready ones have always operated through charismatic figureheads. Tooms? What etymological pedigree does that connote? We've got relatives all over the place, from East India to Alaska—don't get me started on those North Pole, hillbilly assholes, my idiot cousin Zane especially. Anyway, he's dead. The Mexican Army shot him full of holes and good riddance, says I.

Daddy dwelt in an exalted state that transcended mere wealth; he was supreme. He created worlds: futuristic amusement parks, intercontinental ballistic missile systems, and designer panties. He also destroyed worlds: rival companies and rivals; he hunted tame lions in special preserves for dudes too smart to let it all hang out on safari. He aced a few hookers and possibly his first wife, I am convinced. The earth trembled when he walked. Cancer ate him up. All the money in the world couldn't, etcetera, etcetera. Per his request, the board froze his head and stored it in a vault at a Tooms-owned cryogenics lab—like Ted Williams and Walt Disney! Everybody thinks it's an urban legend. Joke's on them; I've seen that Folger's freeze-dried melon with my own two eyes—the hazel and the brown. What's more, he's merely the ninth severed cranium to adorn the techno ice cave. Every Tooms patriarch has gotten the treatment since the 1890s.

Come Doomsday, Daddy and his cohort will return with a vengeance, heads bolted atop weaponized fifteen-story robot bodies to make the Antichrist wee his pants. For now, he dreams upon a baking rack throne

beneath a filament that blazes frozen white light. This private sun blazes cold *and* emits fear. His favorite drug of them all.

Yes, Daddy was a true mogul.

Mother came from Laos. A firebrand. Nobody ever copped to how she hooked up with Daddy. Some say *ambitious courtesan* and those some may be as correct as they are eviscerated and scattered fish food. Not sure if she was one hundred percent Laotian, but I'm a gorgeous purée of whatever plus whatever else. She hated English, hated Daddy, and virulently hated my older brother Increase (the get of the mysteriously late first Mrs. Tooms). She called him Decrease. Doted on yours truly. Taught me how to be an all-pro bitch. Love ya, Moms. Mr. Tooms passed when I was sixteen. Mom died in a mysterious limo fire that same winter. Very traumatic for me, although splitting a fortune with my brothers eased the pain.

The family business putters on under the tyrannical thumb of Increase. He knows what's good for him and leaves me to do as I please. No business woman am I.

My talents lie elsewhere. I revel with the merciless ferocity of a blood goddess. I settle for filthy rich, impossibly rich, which means *anything* is possible. Rich enough to buy a tropical island is rich enough to get a hold of a bag of Moon rocks on the black market is rich enough to turn this dying (dead) Massachusetts port town that time forgot into whatever I want. The people: sailors, peasants, moribund gentry, and their slothful cops, alder persons, zoning commissions, and chamber of commerce bureaucrats, mini moguls who measure up to Dad's shoe laces, if I'm generous. I own them too.

Let's step farther back to my vorpal teens.

Time was I aspired to be better than I am. Kinder, if not cleaner. Were I in the mood to justify a career of evil, I'd cite the head games (snicker) Daddy played with me and Increase, and that other one, the one who got away, the one we never speak of. I'd tell you about the Alsatian, Cheops, my best and only friend during adolescence, and how he drowned himself in the swan pond in a fit of despair. Took him three tries. I fished that waterlogged

doggy corpse out myself because the gardener got shitfaced and fell asleep in the shed.

Mostly, though, I'm the way I am because I like it, love it, can't get enough of it. Nature versus nurture? Why not some of both? It's impossible to ever truly know the truth. You have to dig extra deep to churn the real muck. You have to afford a person an opportunity to sell her soul. Gods above and below, did I have opportunity to aggrandize an overheated imagination!

The idea for the Innsmouth Project has incubated in my brain since I was laid up with pneumonia at age twelve and somebody left a stack of moldy-oldies by the bed. The pinch-lipped ghost of HPL and his genteel madness made a new girl of me.

Great Granddad put ships in bottles. Dad made exquisite dioramas and model cities. Increase enjoyed ant farms. I read Lovecraft and a lot of history. Marie Antoinette's little fake villages captivated me. It all coalesced in my imagination. A vast fortune helped make the dream someone else's nightmare. Frankly, the U.S. government, or a shady subdivision of the government, deserves most of the credit.

Six months after my father passed away I graduated from high school, with honors, and treated myself to a weekend at a Catskill resort that had been a favorite of the Toomses since the Empire State came into existence. No ID required for booze; handsome servants kept the margaritas coming all the livelong day for me and a half-dozen girlfriends I'd flown in for company. Andromeda kept a watch on us. With Daddy out of the picture, there was no telling if Increase or some other wolf might try to erase me from the equation. Ahem, *Andrew.* Andromeda was Andrew then, and not too far removed from his own youth. I read his, *her*, dossier on a whim. She'd majored in paleontology. When I asked why she'd thrown away the chance to unearth dino bones for a security gig, she smiled and told me to mind my business. Most intelligent bodyguard I've ever had, although not necessarily smart.

A guy approached me in the salon and Andi almost broke his arm before I signaled. The dude, nondescript in a polo shirt and cargo pants, introduced himself as Rembrandt Tallen. He bought me a drink. I should have known from the ramrod posture and buzz cut that he was military. The next

morning, upon coming to in a dungeon, blindfolded, chained to a wall, I also deduced that he was a spook. He removed the blindfold and made me an omelet. Pretty snazzy dungeon—it had a wet bar, plasma television, and the walls and ceiling were covered in crimson leather cushions.

Tallen kept mum regarding his team. The game was for me to assume C.I.A. or N.S.A., and that's what I figured at first since our family was frenemies with those organizations. Black holes in the ocean was a topic I vaguely recalled. R&D at one of Daddy's lesser known companies looked into this decades before it became kinda-sorta news on a backwater science scuttlebutt site. The military and commercial implications were astounding.

My captor turned on the TV and played a highlight reel of various improbable atrocities that no citizen, plump and secure in his or her suburban nest, had the first inkling of.

"Oh, my, goodness," I said as in crystal clear wide-screen glory, a giant hydrocephalic baby jammed a man in a suit into its mouth and chewed. Tiny rifles popped and tinier bullets made scarcely a pinprick on the kid's spongey hide. The action shifted to a satellite image of a village in a jungle. Streams of blackness surrounded the village as its inhabitants huddled at the center or atop the roofs of huts. The camera zoomed in as the flood poured over the buildings and the figures dispersed in apparent panic. Not that panicking or fleeing helped—the black rivulets pursued everywhere, into huts, onto roofs, up trees, and engulfed them.

"Beetles of an Ur species unknown to our entomologists until 2006. Vicious bastards. Although they refer to themselves as preservationists." Tallen smiled and his ordinary, bland face transfigured in the jittery blue glow. "Bad things are happening out there, Skylark. How would you like to help us make them worse?"

Would I!

The seduction progressed over the course of a couple of years and numerous clandestine rendezvouses. He quizzed me about Majestic 12, MKULTRA, and Project Tallhat. Had I ever met Toshi Ryoko or Howard Campbell? Amanda Bole? No, no, and no, I'd never even heard of any of these persons or things. That pleased Tallen, and seemed to relax him. He confided his secrets.

“It’s not important, kiddo. Ryoko and Campbell are flakes. I’d love to see them erased, zero-one, zero-one. They have powerful friends, unfortunately. Forget I mentioned them. Servants of our enemies. Ms. Bole is open to an introduction, assuming you and I reach an accord. We think you’re exactly the person to help us with a project.”

“You mean my money can help with your project.”

“Money, honey. You funnel the cash, we supply the technical know-how and the cannon fodder. You have a vision. We have a vision. It’s a can’t miss proposition.”

Tallen was so smooth and charming. I crushed on him. That corn-fed blandness really grew on me, or the Satan-light dancing in his eyes grew on me, or the fact he believed in elaborate conspiracies excited me (he claimed insects were poised to overrun civilization and that the Apollo explorers found a cairn of bones on the Moon). At any rate, he broke out the maps, diagrams, and the slideshow prospectus. My jaw hit the floor.

His organization (I never did learn its name) had, sometime during the winter of 1975, allegedly established contact with an intelligence residing in a trench off the Atlantic shelf. As in an extraterrestrial intelligence that burrowed into the sediment around the time trilobites were the voting majority.

He laughed when I, unabashed Lovecraft enthusiast, blurted *Dagon! Mother Hydra!* and told me not to be stupid, this verged on Clark Ashton Smith weirdness. His associate in the deep requested some Grand Guignol theater in return for certain considerations that only an immortal terror of unconscionable power can offer.

Tallen, having researched my various childish predilections, proposed that we build and staff a life-model replica of Lovecraft’s Innsmouth. Inscrutable alien intelligences enjoy ant farms and aquariums too. Some of them also quite enjoy our trashiest dead white pulp authors. He claimed that this sort of behind the scenes activity was nothing new. In fact, his superiors had been in frequent contact with my father regarding unrelated, yet similar, undertakings.

“Let me consider your proposition,” I said. “Who is Bole? Why do I dislike her already?”

His smile thinned. “Mandy is the devil we know. It’s tricky, you see. She came to us from across the street, on loan from her people. Her people are overseas, so she’s here for the duration.” Later, I learned that *across the street* was code for a foreigner who hailed from an extraordinarily far-flung location. Off-planet, say, but within a few dozen light years. *Overseas* meant something else that I decided was best left unclear.

I did ask once if Bole bore some familial relationship with the “intelligence.” I was high on endorphins and bud.

So was Tallen. That didn’t keep him from slapping my mouth. “Are you trying to be funny? That’s asinine.” He relaxed and kissed away the bits of blood on my lip. “Let’s not do that again, eh?”

I smiled, wanting him to believe I liked it, no hard feelings while I privately reviewed all the ways to kill him slowly.

Surviving to majority as a Tooms heiress tempered my enthusiasm with a grain or two of skepticism. I hired world-class detectives—the best of the best. My bloodhounds tracked down scientists and sources within and without the government and from foreign countries. Results from this intelligence gathering dragnet convinced me of Tallen’s sincerity. Numerous reports indicated covert activity of unparalleled secrecy off the New England coast. The veracity of his most staggering claim would require personal investigation.

Meanwhile, my detectives and the scores of unfortunate people they contacted died in mysterious accidents or vanished. I did the math one day. Okay, Mantooth did it on the back of a napkin. Four hundred and sixty-three. That’s how many went *poof* because I asked the wrong questions. The number might be bigger; we were in the car on the way to a stockholder meeting.

“You gonna do it?” Only Andi would dare to ask.

Pointless question. She knew my capabilities. She knew I had to do it, because beneath the caviar slurping, bubblegum popping, jet setting façade throbbed a black hole that didn’t want to eat the light; it needed to.

This town had a different name when Protestant fisherman Jedidiah Marshal founded it in 1809. Always off the beaten path, always cloistered and clannish, even by New England standards, afflicted by economic vagaries and the consolidation of the fishing industry into mega corporations, this town proved easy to divide and conquer. I retain an army of lackeys to orchestrate these sorts of stunts. Corporate raiders, lawyers, feds on the take, blackmail specialists and assassins.

First, we drove out the monied and the learned. The peasants were re-educated, or, as Tallen preferred, made to vanish. Gradually more actors were introduced and the infrastructure perfected. Necessary elements within the U.S. government made the paperwork right. All it required was a nudge here and a bribe there from Tallen's operatives. The town was wiped from road signs, maps, from the very record. With the groundwork laid, Innsmouth, my own private economy-sized diorama, raised its curtain.

Assuming you're a casual observer, it's a humdrum routine on the surface.

Children ride the bus to school. Housewives tidy and cook while soap operas numb the pain. Husbands toil in the factories or seek their fortune aboard fishing boats. Come dusk, men in suits, or coveralls or raincoats and galoshes, trudge into the taverns and lounges and slap down a goodly portion of the day's wages on booze. At the lone strip club on the waterfront on the north edge of town, bored college girls and older women from trailer parks dance sluggishly. *The House of the Revived Lord* sees brisk trade Wednesday, Black Mass Friday, and by the numbers kiddie-friendly Sunday. I cherish the reactions of the occasional lost soul who accidentally detours through town: Some bluff day trader or officer worker tooling along Main Street with his uptight wife riding shotgun, her face scrunched in annoyance as she comes to grips with the lies the pocket map has fed her; and two point five kids in the back, overheated and embroiled in child warfare.

Annoyance gives way to confusion, which yields to revulsion at the decrepitude of the architecture and physiognomy of the locals, and ultimately, if the visitors prove sufficiently unwise as to partake of the diner, or gods help them, layover at one of Innsmouth's fine hotels, horror will engulf the remainder of their brief existence.

Even I, maestro and chief benefactor, can see but the tip of this iceberg. Scientists and men in black lurk behind the grimy façades of Victorian row houses—the scientists' purpose is to experiment upon the civilian populace as they might lab rats. Green lights flash through the murky windows, screams drift with the wind off the Atlantic. Ships and submarines come and go in the foggy dark. Andromeda and Mantooth worry about what they can't detect. I don't bother to order them to relax. Worrying is in their job description.

I acquired an estate in the hills. Fifteen minutes leisurely drive from town square. The gates are electrified, the house is locked tight, and guys with automatic weapons pace the grounds.

My first encounter with Miss Bole came when she wandered into my rec room unannounced. I sprawled across a giant beanbag while the news anchor recited his nightly soporific. I knew Bole to the core at first sight—kind of tall, black hair in a bob from the '50s, narrow shoulders, wide hips and thunder thighs. Pale and sickly, yet morbidly robust. Eyebrows too heavy, face too basic, too plastic, yet grotesquely alluring like a Celt fertility goddess cast from lumpen clay. She wore a green smock, yoga pants, and sandals. Sweat dripped from her, although she seemed relaxed.

"Hey there, Skylark Tooms. The Gray Eminence loves your style. I'm Amanda Bole. Call me Mandy." Her voice was androgynous. She gripped my small hand in her large, damp hand and brushed my cheek with cool, over-ripe lips.

"Gray Eminence. Is that what you call…him?" Pleasure and terror made my heart skip, skip, skip. Sorry, Agent Tallen, but I think I'm in love.

"It, Skylark. *It*. I usually call it G.E. Confuses anybody at the N.S.A. we haven't bought." Her wide smile revealed white, formidable teeth.

I'm usually an ice bitch during introductions. Feels good to keep the opposition on the defensive. Her? I looked into her sparkling frigid eyes and couldn't stop. Nothing in those shiny pebbles but my dopey face in stereoscope. "When will I meet it?"

"Assuming your luck holds? Never, my girl. G.E. has big plans for you."

Mandy pulled me to my feet. We had tea on the front deck by the swimming pool. The deck has a view of the ocean, hazy and smudged in the

twilight distance. Lights of town came on in twinkling clusters.

“I think I’ve seen enough,” she said, setting aside her cup.

She stripped and dove into the water. Reflections are funny—she kicked into the deeper end, her odd form elongating as it submerged. Ripples distorted my perspective and made her the length and width of a great white shark, gliding downward and gone as the tiles of the pool dilated to reveal a sinkhole.

Tallen called later. “I’m glad you’re all right.”

“Any reason I wouldn’t be?”

“Ms. Bole told me that she’d decided to terminate your involvement. That would involve being shaken from a fish food can over the Atlantic. It seems she changed her mind.”

“Uh, good, then?”

“Convenient! Now we can begin.”

Some of what comes next, you already know. The cold death mask of rage, the pistol in your hand, what comes next is why you’ve returned and looked me up. Here’s some context, some behind-the scenes magic:

“Who gets to escape?” Mandy and I were revolving in the sex swing in the rumpus room. Mantooth hadn’t seemed completely comfortable installing the equipment. I love that repressed New England prudishness about him.

“The narrator.” Mandy’s obsidian eyes reflected the light over my shoulder, or trapped it. Her eyes glazed, or shuttered (happened so fast), and reflected nothing from a patina of broken black vessels, a thousand scratches from infinitesimal webbed claws. “Our girl works for an amateur filmmaker. The source material is a trifle staid. Tallen made sure the filmmaker brought a camera crew, per G.E.’s request. Bubbly blonde, sensible, tough as nails brunette, strapping cinematographer, a weasel tech guy. That way there’s a bit of sex and murder to spice up the proceedings. Our heroine, the sensible brunette, will escape by the skin of her teeth. Over the next couple of years, we’ll shadow her, dangle the clues, and, ultimately, lure her back in for the explosive finale. Should be fun.”

Hard to tell whether Mandy actually relished the impending climax. She remained disinterested regardless the circumstances. I relished it for the two of us.

Earlier, she'd given me a tour of a factory that covered for a subterranean medical complex. Her scientists were busily splicing human and amphibian DNA with genetic material from the Gray Eminence and subjecting that simmering, somatically nucleated mess to electromagnetic waves generated by some kind of Tesla-inspired machine. They'd been at it since the '70s, moving the operation from South Sea lagoons to secret bunkers such as this one. According to the chief researcher, Dr. Shrike, the resultant test tube offspring teemed in the frigid waters along the coast. Allegedly, G.E. found them pleasing. It absorbed more and more fry every spawning cycle. That had to be a positive sign.

A few days later, I received an email. Man, I watched the footage of the pursuit and slaughter of that film crew (all but one) like a jillion times. The only downer, little miss tough as nails brunette stabbed the clerk at the wine shop through the eyeball. Too bad; he was sort of cute, and my god, what exquisite taste.

Point of fact, our heroine stabbed three guys, blew two major buildings to shit (with a few of our drone mercs inside), and steamrolled the Constable as she roared out of town in a wrecker. According to the goon in charge of the affair, at the end his minions weren't even pulling their punches, they were trying to get the hell out of the chick's way.

I was tempted to tell Mandy, sorry, babe, I've got the hots for another woman. Two reasons I kept my mouth shut—one, Mandy scared me oodles and oodles, and two, I suspected she didn't give a damn, which scared me worse.

How do we arrive at this junction? The explosions, the chatter of machine guns, screams, and death? Innsmouth crashing into the sea in a ball of fire? All according to the master plan, the Punch and Judy show demanded by the torpid overlord in the deep. This is similar to what happened in the

infamous story that HP wrote. I often wonder if he had help, a muse from the hadal zone, maybe.

Who can say where art ends and reality asserts primacy? Mandy's script, our *script, called for you, our dark-haired girl, to return at the van of a fleet of black government SUVs. I hired a mercenary company to dress in federal suits and Army camo and swoop in here and blow the town and the reef to smithereens. Much as you did your first time through, except big enough to warm the heart of a Hollywood exec.*

And here we are, you and I.

Certainly I believed my privilege would shield me, that I could gleefully observe the immolation of Innsmouth from the comfort of my mansion's control room. I figured when the smoke cleared and the cry was over, I'd pack my designer bags and flit off to the Caribbean for a change of scenery. Fun as it has been, nine months of cold salt air a year has murdered my complexion and my mood.

Guess you could say I was surprised when my guards were shot to pieces and an armor-piercing rocket blasted the front door. That's what Mantooth said they hit us with before you waltzed in here and capped him. Through the eyeball, no less. Don't you get it? All this destruction, Mandy and Tallen's betrayal, you glowering down at me, poised to ram a dagger through my black little heart? A mix of prep and improv. Somewhere a dark god is laughing in delight, rapping his knuckles on the aquarium glass to get the fishies spinning.

The question is, do you want to live to see a curtain call. You're the heroine and if we're following the original plot, you have an unpleasant reckoning in your near future. I don't think this version of the tale will see you transforming into a fish-woman and paddling into the sunset. No, this is major league awful. G.E. awaits your pleasure. I doubt even God knows what's going to happen in the monster's lair. Got to be boring, lying there and emoting telepathically eon after eon. You'll make a pretty dolly, for a while.

Or, you could play it smart. My jet is fueled and idling at a strip just down the road. With my money, we can go damned near anywhere. Take your time and think it over. I'll give you until I finish this cigarette.

BANG! from a gun. A body thuds on the floor off-screen.

GODDAMNIT, *Andi! Why the fuck did you do that to the broad? It was under control. I had her in the palm of my hand. Shit. What do we do now? Mandy is gonna go nuclear. G.E. surely won't be amused. Where do we find a metaphorical virgin sacrifice at this hour? Andi… ? Andi!*

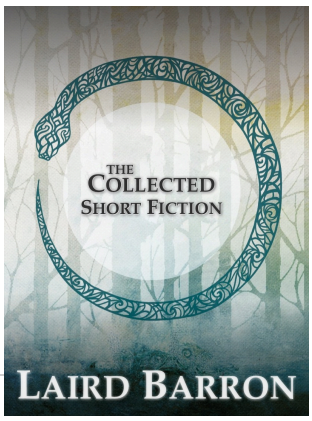
You bitch. You almost had me going. No, I'm not sure if anywhere is beyond the reach of our friends. But let's hit the friendly skies and see, huh? Shut that down. I want to watch it later.

Click.

In A Cavern In A Canyon

This version taken from *Seize The Night*, October 2015

First published in *Sieze The Night*, October 2015



Husband number one fondly referred to me as the Good Samaritan. Anything from a kid lost in the neighborhood to a county-wide search-and-rescue effort, I got involved. If we drove past a fender bender, I had to stop and lend a hand or snap a few pictures, maybe do a walk-around of the scene. A major crash? Forget about it—I'd haunt the site until the cows came home or the cops shooed me away. Took the better part of a decade for the lightbulb to flash over my hubby's bald head. He realized I wasn't a Samaritan so much as a fetishist. Wore him down in the end and he bailed. I'm still melancholy over that one.

Lucky for him he didn't suffer through my stint with the Park Service in Alaska. After college and the first kid, I finagled my way onto the government payroll and volunteered for every missing-person, lost-climber, downed-plane, or wrecked-boat scenario. I hiked and camped on the side. Left my compass and maps at home. I wanted to disappear. Longest I managed was four days. The feds were suspicious enough to send me to a shrink who knew his business. The boys upstairs gave me a generous severance check and said to not let the door hit me in the ass on the way out. Basically the beginning of a long downward slide in my life.

Husband number three divorced me for my fifty-fourth birthday. I pawned everything that wouldn't fit into a van and drove from Ohio back home to Alaska. I rented a double-wide at the Cottonwood Point Trailer Park near Moose Pass, two miles along the bucolic and winding Seward Highway from Cassie, my youngest daughter.

A spruce forest crowds the back door. Moose nibble the rhododendrons hedging the yard. Most folks tuck in for the night by the time Colbert is delivering his monologue. Cassie drops off my infant granddaughter, Vera,

two or three times a week and whenever she can't find a sitter. Single and working two jobs, Cassie avoided the inevitability of divorce by not getting married in the first place. Wish I'd thought of that. Once I realized that my nanny gig was a regular thing, I ordered a crib and inveigled the handsome (and generally drunken, alas) fellow at 213 to set it up in my bedroom.

On the nanny evenings, I feed Vera her bottle and watch westerns on cable. "Get you started right," I say to her as Bronson ventilates Fonda beneath a glaring sun, or when a cowboy rides into the red-and-gold distance as the credits roll. She'll be a tomboy like her gram if I have any influence. The classic stars were my heroes once upon a time—Stewart, Van Cleef, Wayne, and Marvin. During my youth, I utterly revered Eastwood. I crushed big-time on the Man with No Name and Dirty Harry. Kept a poster from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* on my bedroom wall. So young, both of us. So innocent. Except for the shooting and murdering, and my lustful thoughts, but you know.

Around midnight, I wake from a nap on the couch to Vera's plaintive cry. She's in the bedroom crib, awake and pissed for her bottle. The last act of *High Plains Drifter* plays in bad 1970s Technicolor. It's the part where the Stranger finally gets around to exacting righteous vengeance. Doesn't matter that I've missed two rapes, a horsewhipping, Lago painted red and renamed HELL… all those images are imprinted upon my hindbrain. I get the impression the scenes are *always* rolling down there against the screen of my subconscious.

I am depressed to recognize a cold fact in this instant. The love affair with bad-boy Clint ended years and years ago, even if I haven't fully accepted the reality. Eyes gummed with sleep, I sit for a few seconds, mesmerized by the stricken faces of the townspeople who are caught between a vicious outlaw gang and a stranger hell-bent on retribution. The Stranger's whip slithers through the saloon window and garrotes an outlaw. I've watched that scene on a dozen occasions. My hands shake and I can't zap it with the remote fast enough.

That solves one problem. I take the formula from the fridge and pop it into the fancy warmer Cassie obtained during a clearance sale. The LED numerals are counting down to nothing when it occurs to me that I don't watch the baby on Sundays.

The night in 1977 that my father disappeared, he, Uncle Ned, and I drove north along Midnight Road, searching for Tony Orlando. Dad crept the Fleetwood at a walking pace. My younger siblings, Doug, Shauna, and Artemis, remained at home. Doug was ostensibly keeping an eye on our invalid grandmother, but I figured he was probably glued to the television with the others. That autumn sticks in my memory like mud to a Wellington. We were sixteen, fourteen, eleven, and ten. Babes in the wilderness.

Uncle Ned and I took turns yelling out the window. Whenever Orlando pulled this stunt, Dad swore it would be the last expedition he mounted to retrieve the “damned mutt.” I guess he really meant it.

Middle-school classmate Nancy Albrecht once asked me what the hell kind of name was that for a dog, and I said Mom and Dad screwed on the second date to “Halfway to Paradise,” and if you laugh I’ll smack your teeth down your throat. I have a few scars on my knuckles, for damn sure.

Way back then, we lived in Eagle Talon, Alaska, an isolated port about seventy miles southwest of Anchorage. Cruise ships bloated the town with tourists during spring, and it dried up to around three hundred resident souls come autumn.

Eastern settlers had carved a hamlet from wilderness during the 1920s, plunked it down in a forgotten vale populated by eagles, bears, drunk teamsters, and drunker fishermen. Mountains and dense forest on three sides formed a deep-water harbor. The channel curved around the flank of Eagle Mountain and eventually let into Prince William Sound. Roads were gravel or dirt. We had the cruise ships and barges. We also had the railroad. You couldn’t make a move without stepping in seagull shit. Most of us townies lived in a fourteen-story apartment complex called the Frazier Estate. We kids shortened it to Fate. Terra incognita began where the sodium lamplight grew fuzzy. At night, wolves howled in the nearby hills. Definitely not the dream hometown of a sixteen-year-old girl. As a grown woman, I recall it with a bittersweet fondness.

Upon commencing the hunt for Orlando, whom my little brother, Doug, had stupidly set free from the leash only to watch in mortification as the dog trotted into the sunset, tail furled with rebellious intent, Dad faced a

choice—head west along the road, or troll the beach where the family pet sometimes mined for rotten salmon carcasses. We picked the road because it wound into the woods and our shepherd-husky mix hankered after the red squirrels that swarmed during the fall. Dad didn't want to walk if he could avoid it. "Marched goddamned plenty in the Crotch," he said. It had required a major effort for him to descend to the parking garage and get the wagon started and pointed in the general direction of our search route. Two bad knees, pain pills for said knees, and a half-rack-a-day habit had all but done him in.

Too bad for Uncle Ned and me, Midnight Road petered out in the foothills. Moose trails went every which way from the little clearing where we'd parked next to an abandoned Winnebago with a raggedy tarp covering the front end and black garbage bags over the windows. Hoboes and druggies occasionally used the Winnebago as a fort until Sheriff Lockhart came along to roust them. "Goddamned railroad," Dad would say, despite the fact that if not for the railroad (for which he performed part-time labor to supplement his military checks) and the cruise ships and barges, there wouldn't be any call for Eagle Talon whatsoever.

Uncle Ned lifted himself from the backseat and accompanied me as I shined the flashlight and hollered for Orlando. Dad remained in the station wagon with the engine running and the lights on. He honked the horn.

"He's gonna keep doing that, huh?" Uncle Ned wasn't exactly addressing me, more like an actor musing to himself on the stage. "Just gonna keep leanin' on that horn every ten seconds—"

The horn blared again. Farther off and dim—we'd come a ways already. Birch and alder were broken by stands of furry black spruce that muffled sounds from the outside world. The black, green, and gray webbing is basically the Spanish moss of the Arctic. Uncle Ned chuckled and shook his head. Two years Dad's junior and a major-league stoner, *he'd* managed to keep it together when it counted. He taught me how to tie a knot and paddle a canoe, and gave me a lifetime supply of dirty jokes. He'd also explained that contrary to Dad's Cro-Magnon take on teenage dating, boys were okay to fool around with so long as I ducked the bad ones and avoided getting knocked up. *Which ones were bad?* I wondered. Most of them, according to the Book of Ned, but keep it to fooling around and all would be well. He

also clued me in to the fact that Dad's vow to blast any would-be suitor's pecker off with his twelve-gauge was an idle threat. My old man couldn't shoot worth spit even when sober.

The trail forked. One path climbed into the hills where the undergrowth thinned. The other path curved deeper into the creepy spruce where somebody had strung blue reflective tape among the branches—a haphazard mess like the time Dad got lit up and tried to decorate the Christmas tree.

"Let's not go in there," Uncle Ned said. Ominous, although not entirely unusual, as he often said that kind of thing with a similar laconic dryness. *That bar looks rough, let's try the next one over. That woman looks like my ex-wife, I'm not gonna dance with her, uh-uh. That box has got to be heavy. Let's get a beer and think on it.*

"Maybe he's at the beach rolling in crap," I said. Orlando loved bear turds and rotten salmon guts with a true passion. There'd be plenty of both near the big water, and as I squinted into the forbidding shadows, I increasingly wished we'd driven there instead.

Uncle Ned pulled his coat tighter and lit a cigarette. The air had dampened. I yelled, "Orlando!" a few more times. Then we stood there for a while in the silence. It was like listening through the lid of a coffin. Dad had stopped leaning on the horn. The woodland critters weren't making their usual fuss. Clouds drifted in and the darkness was so complete it wrapped us in a cocoon. "Think Orlando's at the beach?" I said.

"Well, I dunno. He ain't here."

"Orlando, you stupid jerk!" I shouted to the night in general.

"Let's boogie," Uncle Ned said. The cherry of his cigarette floated in midair and gave his narrowed eyes a feral glint. Like Dad, he was middling tall and rangy. Sharp-featured and often wry. He turned and moved the way we'd come, head lowered, trailing a streamer of Pall Mall smoke. Typical of my uncle. Once he made a decision, he acted.

"Damn it, Orlando." I gave up and followed, sick to my gut with worry. Fool dog would be the death of me, or so I suspected. He'd tangled with a porcupine the summer before and I'd spent hours picking quills from his swollen snout because Dad refused to take him in to see Doc Green. There

were worse things than porcupines in these woods—black bears, angry moose, wolves—and I feared my precious idiot would run into one of them.

Halfway back to the car, I glimpsed a patch of white to my left amid the heavy brush. I took it for a birch stump with holes rotted into the heartwood. No, it was a man lying on his side, matted black hair framing his pale face. By pale, I mean bone-white and bloodless. The face you see on the corpse of an outlaw in those old-timey Wild West photographs.

"Help me," he whispered.

I trained my light on the injured man; he had to be hurt because of the limp, contorted angle of his body, his shocking paleness. He seemed familiar. The lamp beam broke around his body like a stream splits around a large stone. The shadows turned slowly, fracturing and changing him. He might've been weirdo Floyd, who swept the Caribou after last call, or that degenerate trapper, Bob something, who lived in a shack in the hills with a bunch of stuffed moose heads and mangy beaver hides. Or it might've been as I first thought—a tree stump lent a man's shape by my lying eyes. The more I stared, the less certain I became that it was a person at all.

Except I'd heard him speak, voice raspy and high-pitched from pain, almost a falsetto.

Twenty-five feet, give or take, between me and the stranger. I didn't see his arm move. Move it did, however. The shadows shifted again and his hand grasped futilely, thin and gnarled as a tree branch. His misery radiated into me, caused my eyes to well with tears of empathy. I felt terrible, just terrible, I wanted to mother him, and took a step toward him.

"Hortense. Come here." Uncle Ned said my name the way Dad described talking to his wounded buddies in 'Nam. The ones who'd gotten hit by a grenade or a stray bullet. Quiet, calm, and reassuring was the ticket—and I bet his tone would've worked its magic if my insides had happened to be splashed on the ground and the angels were singing me home. In this case, Uncle Ned's unnatural calmness scared me, woke me from a dream where I heroically tended to a hapless stranger, got a parade and a key to the village, and my father's grudging approval.

"Hortense, please."

"There's a guy in the bushes," I said. "I think he's hurt."

Uncle Ned grabbed my hand like he used to when I was a little girl and towed me along at a brisk pace. “Naw, kid. That’s a tree stump. I saw it when we went past earlier. Keep movin’.”

I didn’t ask why we were in such a hurry. It worried me how easy it seemed for him and Dad to slip into warrior mode at the drop of a hat. He muttered something about branches snapping and that black bears roamed the area as they fattened up for winter and he regretted leaving his guns at his house. *House* is sort of a grand term; Uncle Ned lived in a mobile home on the edge of the village. The Estate didn’t appeal to his loner sensibilities.

We got to walking so fast along that narrow trail that I twisted my ankle on a root and nearly went for a header. Uncle Ned didn’t miss a beat. He took most of my weight upon his shoulder. Pretty much dragged me back to the Fleetwood. The engine ran and the driver-side door was ajar. I assumed Dad had gone behind a tree to take a leak. As the minutes passed and we called for him, I began to understand that he’d left. Those were the days when men abandoned their families by saying they needed to grab a pack of cigarettes and beating it for the high timber. He’d threatened to do it during his frequent arguments with Mom. She’d beaten him to the punch and jumped ship with a traveling salesman, leaving us to fend for ourselves. Maybe, just maybe, it was Dad’s turn to bail on us kids.

Meanwhile, Orlando had jumped in through the open door and curled into a ball in the passenger seat. Leaves, twigs, and dirt plastered him. A pig digging for China wouldn’t have been any filthier. Damned old dog pretended to sleep. His thumping tail gave away the show, though.

Uncle Ned rousted him and tried to put him on Dad’s trail. Nothing doing. Orlando whined and hung his head. He refused to budge despite Uncle Ned’s exhortations. Finally, the dog yelped and scrambled back into the car, trailing a stream of piss. That was our cue to depart.

Uncle Ned drove back to the Frazier Estate. He called Deputy Clausen (everybody called him Claws) and explained the situation. Claws agreed to gather a few men and do a walk-through of the area. He theorized that Dad had gotten drunk and wandered into the hills and collapsed somewhere. Such events weren’t rare.

Meanwhile, I checked in on Grandma, who'd occupied the master bedroom since she'd suffered the aneurysm. Next, I herded Orlando into the bathroom and soaked him in the tub. I was really hurting by then.

When I thanked Uncle Ned, he nodded curtly and avoided meeting my eye. "Lock the door," he said.

"Why? The JWs aren't allowed out of the compound after dark." Whenever I got scared, I cracked wise.

"Don't be a smart-ass. Lock the fuckin' door."

"Something fishy in Denmark," I said to Orlando, who leaned against my leg as I threw the dead bolt. Mrs. Wells had assigned *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Titus Andronicus* for summer reading. "And it's the Ides of August, too."

My brothers and sister were sprawled in the living room in front of the TV, watching a vampire flick. Christopher Lee wordlessly seduced a buxom chick who was practically falling out of her peasant blouse. Lee angled for a bite. Then he saw, nestled in the woman's cleavage, the teeny elegant crucifix her archaeologist boyfriend had given her for luck. Lee's eyes went buggy with rage and fear. The vampire equivalent to blue balls, I guess. I took over Dad's La-Z-Boy and kicked back with a bottle of Coke (the last one, as noted by the venomous glares of my siblings) and a bag of ice on my puffy ankle.

The movie ended and I clapped my hands and sent the kids packing. At three bedrooms, our apartment qualified as an imperial suite. Poor Dad sacked out on the couch. Doug and Artemis shared the smallest, crappiest room. I bunked with Shauna, the princess of jibber-jabber. She loved and feared me, and that made tight quarters a bit easier, because she knew I'd sock her in the arm if she sassed me too much or pestered me with one too many goober questions. Often, she'd natter on while I piped Fleetwood Mac and Led Zeppelin through a set of gigantic yellow earphones. That self-isolation spared us a few violent and teary scenes, I'm sure.

Amid the grumbles and the rush for the toilet, I almost confessed the weird events of the evening to Doug. My kid brother had an open mind when it came to the unknown. He wouldn't necessarily laugh me out of the room without giving the matter some real thought. Instead, I smacked the back of

his head and told him not to be such a dumb ass with Orlando. Nobody remarked on Dad's absence. I'm sure they figured he'd pitched camp at the Caribou like he did so many nights. Later, I lay awake and listened to my siblings snore. Orlando whined as he dreamed of the chase, or of being chased.

From the bedroom, Gram said in a fragile, singsong tone, "In a cavern, in a canyon, excavatin' for a mine, dwelt a miner forty-niner and his daughter Clementine. In a cavern, in a canyon. In a cavern, in a canyon. In a cavern, in a canyon. Clementine, Clementine. Clementine? Clementine?"

Of the four Shaw siblings I'm the eldest, tallest, and surliest.

According to Mom, Dad had desperately wanted a boy for his firstborn. He descended from a lineage that adhered to a pseudo-medieval mind-set. The noble chauvinist, the virtuous warrior, the honorable fighter of rearguard actions. Quaint when viewed through a historical lens; a real pain in the ass in the modern world.

I was a disappointment. As a daughter, what else could I be? He got used to it. The Shaws have a long, long history of losing. We own that shit. *Go down fighting* would've been our family motto, with a snake biting the heel that crushed its skull as our crest. As some consolation, I was always a tomboy and tougher than either of my brothers—a heap tougher than most of the boys in our hick town, and tougher than at least a few of the grown men. Toughness isn't always measured by how hard you punch. Sometimes, most of the time, it's simply the set of a girl's jaw. I shot my mouth off with the best of them. If nothing else, I dutifully struck at the heels of my oppressors. Know where I got this grit? Sure as hell not from Dad. Oh, yeah, he threw a nasty left hook, and he'd scragged a few guys in 'Nam. But until Mom had flown the coop she ruled our roost with an iron fist that would've made Khrushchev think twice before crossing her. Yep, the meanness in my soul is pure-D Mom.

Dad had all the homespun apothegms.

He often said, *Never try to beat a man at what he does*. What Dad did best was drink. He treated it as a competitive event. In addition to chugging Molson Export, Wild Turkey, and Stoli, Dad also smoked the hell out of cannabis whenever he could get his hands on some. He preferred the heavy-

hitting bud from Mexico courtesy of Uncle Ned. I got my hands on a bag those old boys stashed in a rolled-up sock in a number-ten coffee can. That stuff sent you, all right. Although, judging by the wildness of Dad's eyes, the way they started and stared at the corners of the room after he'd had a few hits, his destination was way different from mine.

Even so, the Acapulco Gold gave me a peek through the keyhole into Dad's soul in a way booze couldn't. Some blood memory got activated. It might've been our sole point of commonality. He would've beaten me to a pulp if he'd known. For my own good, natch.

Main thing I took from growing up the daughter of an alcoholic? Lots of notions compete for the top spot—the easiest way to get vomit and blood out of fabric, the best apologies, the precise amount of heed to pay a drunken diatribe, when to duck flung bottles, how to balance a checkbook and cook a family meal between homework, dog-walking, and giving sponge baths to Gram. But above all, my essential takeaway was that I'd never go down the rabbit hole to an eternal happy hour. I indulged in a beer here and there, toked some Mary Jane to reward myself for serving as Mom, Dad, chief cook and bottle washer pro-tem. Nothing heavy, though. I resolved to leave the heavy lifting to Dad, Uncle Ned, and their buddies at the Caribou Tavern.

Randal Shaw retired from the USMC in 1974 after twenty years of active service. Retirement didn't agree with him. To wit: the beer, bourbon, and weed, and the sullen hurling of empties. It didn't agree with Mom either, obviously. My grandmother, Harriet Shaw, suffered a brain aneurysm that very autumn. Granddad had passed away the previous winter and Gram moved into our apartment. By day, she slumped in a special medical recliner we bought from the Eagle Talon Emergency Trauma Center. Vivian from upstairs sat with her while I was at school. Gram's awareness came and went like a bad radio signal. Sometimes she'd make a feeble attempt to play cards with Vivian. Occasionally, she asked about my grades and what cute boys I'd met, or she'd watch TV and chuckle at the soaps in that rueful way she laughed at so many ridiculous things. The clarity became rare. Usually she stared out the window at the harbor or at the framed Georgia O'Keeffe-knockoff print of a sunflower above the dresser. Hours passed and we'd shoo away the mosquitoes while she tunelessly hummed "In a

cavern, in a canyon, excavatin' for a mine" on a loop. There may as well have been a VACANCY sign blinking above her head.

After school, and twice daily on weekends, Doug helped bundle Gram into the crappy fold-up chair and I pushed her around the village, took her down to the wharf to watch the seagulls, or parked her in front of the general store while I bought Dad a pack of smokes (and another for myself). By night, Dad or I pushed the button and lowered the bed and she lay with her eyes fixed on the dented ceiling of the bedroom. She'd sigh heavily and say, "Nighty-night, nighty-night," like a parrot. It shames me to remember her that way. But then, most of my childhood is a black hole.

The search party found neither hide nor hair of Dad. Deputy Clausen liked Uncle Ned well enough and agreed to do a bigger sweep in the afternoon. The deputy wasn't enthused. Old Harmon Snodgrass, a trapper from Kobuk, isolated footprints in the soft dirt along the edge of the road. The tracks matched Dad's boots and were headed toward town. Snodgrass lost them after a couple hundred yards.

In Deputy Clausen's professional opinion, Randal Shaw had doubled back and flown the coop to parts unknown, as a certain kind of man is wont to do when the going gets tough. Uncle Ned socked him (the Shaw answer to critics) and Claws would've had his ass in a cell for a good long time, except Stu Herring, the mayor of our tiny burg, and Kyle Lomax were on hand to break up the festivities and soothe bruised egos. Herring sent Uncle Ned home with a *go and sin no more* scowl.

"How's Mom?" Uncle Ned stared at Gram staring at a spot on the wall. He sipped the vilest black coffee on the face of the earth. My specialty. I'd almost tripped over him in the hallway on my way to take Orlando for his morning stroll. He'd spent the latter portion of the night curled near our door, a combat knife in his fist. Normally, one might consider that loony behavior. You had to know Uncle Ned.

"She's groovy, as ever. Why are you lurking?" The others were still zonked, thank God. I hadn't an inkling of how to break the news of Dad's defection to them. I packed more ice onto my ankle. My foot had swollen to the point where it wouldn't fit into my sneaker. It really and truly hurt. "Ow."

“Let’s go. Hospital time.” He stood abruptly and went in and woke Doug, told him, “Drop your cock and grab your socks. You’re man of the house for an hour. Orlando needs a walk—for the love of God, keep him on a leash, will ya?” Then he nabbed Dad’s keys and took me straightaway to the Eagle Clinic. Mrs. Cooper, a geriatric hypochondriac, saw the RN, Sally Mackey, ahead of us, and we knew from experience that it would be a hell of a wait. So Uncle Ned and I settled into hard plastic waiting room chairs. He lit a cigarette, and another for me, and said, “Okay, I got a story. Don’t tell your old man I told you, or he’ll kick my ass and then I’ll kick yours. Yeah?”

I figured it would be a story of his hippie escapades or some raunchy bullshit Dad got up to in Vietnam. A tale to cheer me up and take my mind off my troubles. Uh-uh. He surprised me by talking about the Good Friday Earthquake of ’64. “You were, what? Two, three? You guys lived in that trailer park in Anchorage. The quake hits and your dad’s been shipped to ’Nam. My job was to look over you and your mom. Meanwhile, I’m visiting a little honey out in the Valley. Girl had a cabin on a lake. We just came in off the ice for a mug of hot cocoa and *boom!* Looked like dynamite churned up the bottom muck. Shit flew off the shelves, the earth moved in waves like the sea. Spruce trees bent all the way over and slapped their tops on the ground. Sounded like a train runnin’ through the living room. Tried callin’ your mom, but the phone lines were down.

“I jumped in my truck and headed for Anchorage. Got partway there and had to stop. Highway was too fucked up to drive on. Pavement cracked open, bridges collapsed. I got stuck in a traffic jam on the flats. Some cars were squashed under a collapsed overpass and a half-dozen more kinda piled on. It was nine or ten at night and pitch-black. Accidents everywhere. The temperature dropped into the twenties and mist rolled in from the water. Road flares and headlights and flashing hazards made the scene extra spooky. I could taste hysteria in the air. Me and a couple of Hells Angels from Wasilla got together and made sure people weren’t trapped or hurt too bad. Then we started pushing cars off the road to get ready for the emergency crews.

“We were taking a smoke break when one of the bikers said to shut up a minute. A big, potbellied Viking, at least twice the size of me and his

younger pal. Fuckin’ enormous. He cocked his head and asked us if we’d heard it too—somebody moaning for help down on the flats. He didn’t hang around for an answer. Hopped over the guardrail and was gone. Man on a mission. Guy didn’t come back after a few minutes. Me and the younger biker climbed down the embankment and went into the pucker-brush. Shouted ourselves hoarse and not a damned reply. Mist was oozin’ off the water and this weird, low-tide reek hit me. A cross between green gas from inside a blown moose carcass and somethin’ sweet, like fireweed. I heard a noise, reminded me of water and air bubbles gurglin’ through a hose. Grace a God, I happened to shine my light on a boot stickin’ outta the scrub. The skinny biker yelled his buddy’s name and ran over there.”

Uncle Ned had gotten worked up during the narration of his story. He lit another cigarette and paced to the coffee machine and back. Bernice Monson, the receptionist, glared over her glasses. She didn’t say anything. In ’77 most folks kept their mouths shut when confronted by foamy Vietnam vets. Bernice, like everybody else, assumed Uncle Ned did a jungle tour as a government employee. He certainly resembled the part with his haggard expression, his brooding demeanor, and a partialness for camouflage pants. Truth was, while many young men were blasting away at each other in Southeast Asia, he’d backpacked across Canada, Europe, and Mexico. Or *went humping foreign broads and scrawling doggerel*, as my dad put it.

Uncle Ned’s eyes were red as a cockscomb. He slapped the coffee machine. “I didn’t have a perfect position and my light was weak, but I saw plenty. The Viking lay on top of somebody. This somebody was super skinny and super pale. Lots of wild hair. Their arms and legs were tangled so’s you couldn’t make sense of what was goin’ on. I thought he had him a woman there in the weeds and they were fuckin’. Their faces were stuck together. The young biker leaned over his buddy and then yelped and stumbled backward. The skinny, pale one shot out from under the Viking and into the darkness. Didn’t stand, didn’t crouch, didn’t even flip over—know how a mechanic rolls from under a car on his board? Kinda that way, except jittery. Moved like an insect scuttling for cover, best I can describe it. A couple seconds later, the huge biker shuddered and went belly-crawling after the skinny fellow. What I thought I was seeing him do, anyhow. His

arms and legs flopped, although his head never lifted, not completely. He just skidded away, Superman style, his face planted in the dirt.

"Meanwhile, the young biker hauled ass toward the road, shriekin' the whole way. My flashlight died. I stood there, in the dark, heart poundin', scared shitless, tryin' to get my brain outta neutral. I wanted to split, hell yeah. No fuckin' way I was gonna tramp around on those flats by myself. I'm a hunter, though. Those instincts kicked in and I decided to play it cool. Your dad always pegged me for a peacenik hippie because I didn't do 'Nam. I'm smarter, is the thing. Got a knife in my pocket and half the time I'm packin' heat too. Had my skinning knife, and lemme say, I kept it handy as I felt my way through the bushes and the brambles. Got most of the way to where I could see the lights of the cars on the road. Somebody whispered, "Help me." Real close and on my flank. Scared me, sure. I probably jumped three feet straight up. And yet, it was the saddest voice I can remember. Woeful, like a lost child, or a wounded woman, or a fawn, or some combination of those cries.

"I mighta turned around and walked into the night, except a state trooper hit me with a light. He'd come over the hill lookin' after the biker went bugshit. I think the cop thought the three of us were involved in a drug deal. He sure as hell didn't give a lick about a missing Hells Angel. He led me back to the clusterfuck on the highway and I spent the rest of the night shivering in my car while the bulldozers and dump trucks did their work." He punched the coffee machine.

"Easy, killer!" I said, and gave an apologetic smile to the increasingly agitated Bernice. I patted the seat next to me until he came over and sat. "What happened to the biker? The big guy."

Uncle Ned had sliced his knuckles. He clenched his fist and watched the blood drip onto the tiles. "Cops found him that summer in the water. Not enough left for an autopsy. The current and the fish had taken him apart. Accidental death, they decided. I saw the younger biker at the Gold Digger. Musta been five or six years after the Good Friday quake. He acted like he'd forgotten what happened to his partner until I bought him the fifth or sixth tequila. *He* got a real close look at what happened. Said that to him, the gurglin' was more of a slurpin'. An animal lappin' up a gory supper. Then he looked me in the eye and said his buddy got snatched into the

darkness by his own guts. They were comin' outta his mouth and whatever it was out there gathered 'em up and reeled him in."

"Holy shit, Uncle Ned." Goose pimples covered my arms. "That's nuts. Who do you think was out there?"

"The boogeyman. Whatever it is that kids think is hidin' under their bed."

"You tell Dad? Probably not, huh? He's a stick-in-the-mud. He'd never buy it."

"Well, you don't either. Guess that makes you a stick-in-the-mud too."

"The apple, the tree, gravity…"

"Maybe you'd be surprised what your old man knows." Uncle Ned's expression was shrewd. "I been all over this planet. Between '66 and '74, I roamed. Passed the peace pipe with the Lakota, ate peyote with the Mexicans, drank wine with the Italians, and smoked excellent bud with a whole lot of other folks. I get bombed enough, or stoned enough, I ask if anybody else has heard of the Help Me Monster. What I call it. The Help Me Monster."

The description evoked images of *Sesame Street* and plush toys dancing on wires. "Grover the Psycho Killer!" I said, hoping he'd at least crack a smile. I also hoped my uncle hadn't gone around the bend.

He didn't smile. We sat there in one of those long, awkward silences while Bernice coughed her annoyance and shuffled papers. I was relieved when Sally Mackey finally stuck her head into the room and called my name.

The nurse wanted to send me to Anchorage for X-rays. No way would Dad authorize that expense. No veterinarians and no doctors; those were ironclad rules. When he discovered Uncle Ned took me to the clinic, he'd surely blow his top. I wheedled a bottle of prescription-strength aspirin and a set of cheapo crutches on the house and called it square. A mild ankle sprain meant I'd be on the crutches for days. I added it to the tab of Shaw family dues.

Dad never came home. I cried, the kids cried. Bit by bit, we moved on. Some of us more than others.

I won't bore you with the nightmares that got worse and worse with time. You can draw your own conclusions. That strange figure in the woods,

Dad’s vanishing act, and Uncle Ned’s horrifying tale coalesced into a witch’s brew that beguiled me and became a serious obsession.

Life is messy and it’s mysterious. Had my father walked away from his family or had he been taken? If the latter, then why Dad and not me or Uncle Ned? I didn’t crack the case, didn’t get any sense of closure. No medicine man or antiquarian popped up to give me the scoop on some ancient enemy that dwells in the shadows and dines upon the blood and innards of Good Samaritans and hapless passersby.

Closest I came to solving the enigma was during my courtship with husband number two. He said a friend of a friend was a student biologist on a research expedition in Canada. His team and local authorities responded to a massive train derailment near a small town. Rescuers spent three days clearing out the survivors. On day four, they swept the scattered wreckage for bodies.

This student, who happened to be Spanish, and three fellow countrymen were way out in a field after dark, poking around with sticks. One of them heard a voice moaning for help. Of course, they scrambled to find this wretched soul. Late to the scene, a military search-and-rescue helicopter flew overhead, very low, its searchlight blazing. When the chopper had gone, all fell silent. The cries didn’t repeat. Weird part, according to the Spaniard, was that in the few minutes they’d frantically tried to locate the injured person, his voice kept moving around in some bizarre acoustical illusion. The survivor switched from French to English, and finally to Spanish. The biologist claimed he had nightmares of the incident for years afterward. He dreamed of his buddies separated in a dark field, each crying for help, and he’d stumble across their desiccated corpses, one by one. He attributed it to the guilt of leaving someone to die on the tundra.

My husband-to-be told me that story while high on coke and didn’t mention it again. I wonder if that’s why I married the sorry sonofabitch. Just for that single moment of connectedness, a tiny and inconstant flicker of light in the wilderness.

High noon on a Sunday night.

Going on thirty-eight haunted years, I’ve expected this, or something like this, even though the entity represents, with its very jack-in-the-box

manifestation, a deep, dark mystery of the universe. What has drawn it to me is equally inexplicable. I've considered the fanciful notion that the Shaws are cursed and Mr. Help Me is the instrument of vengeance. Doesn't feel right. I've also prayed to Mr. Help Me as if he, or it, is a death god watching over us cattle. Perhaps it is. The old gods wanted blood, didn't they? Blood and offerings of flesh. That feels more on the mark. Or it could be the simplest answer of them all—Mr. Help Me is an exotic animal whose biology and behavior defy scientific classification. The need for sustenance is the least of all possible mysteries. I can fathom *that* need, at least.

A window must be open in my bedroom. Cool night air dries the sweat on my cheeks as I stand in the darkened hall. The air smells vaguely of spoiled meat and perfume. A black, emaciated shape lies prone on the floor, halfway across the bedroom threshold. Long, skinny arms are extended in a swimmer's pose. Its face is a smudge of white and tilted slightly upward to regard me. It is possible that these impressions aren't accurate, that my eyes are interpreting as best they can.

I slap a switch. The light flickers on but doesn't illuminate the hall or the figure sprawled almost directly beneath the fixture. Instead, the glow bends at a right angle and gathers on the paneled wall in a diffuse cone.

"Help me," the figure says. The murmur is so soft it might've originated in my own head.

I'm made of sterner stuff than my sixteen-year-old self. I resist the powerful compulsion to approach, to lend maternal comfort. My legs go numb. I stagger and slide down the wall into a seated position. Everybody has had the nightmare. The one where you are perfectly aware and paralyzed and an unseen enemy looms over your shoulder. Difference is, I can see my nemesis, or at least its outline, at the opposite end of the hall. I can see it coming for me. It doesn't visibly move except when I blink, and then it's magically two or three feet closer. My mind is in overdrive. What keeps going through my mind is that predator insects seldom stir until the killing strike.

"Oh my darlin', oh my darlin', oh my darlin' Clementine. You are lost and gone forever, dreadful sorry, Clementine." I hum tunelessly, like Gram used to after her brain softened into mush. I'm reverting to childhood, to a time

when Dad or Uncle Ned might burst through the door and save the day with a blast of double-aught buckshot.

It finally dawns upon me that I'm bleeding, am sitting in a puddle of blood. Where the blood is leaking from, I've not the foggiest notion. Silly me, *that's* why I'm dead from the waist down. My immobility isn't a function of terror, pheromones, or the occult powers of an evil spirit. I've been pricked and poisoned. Nature's predators carry barbs and stings. Those stings deliver anesthetics and anticoagulants. Have venom, will travel. I chuckle. My lips are cold.

"Help me," it whispers as it plucks my toes, testing my resistance. Even this close, it's an indistinct blob of shadowy appendages.

"I have one question." I enunciate carefully, the way I do after one too many shots of Jäger. "Did you take my dad on August fifteenth, 1977? Or did that bastard skip out? Me and my brother got a steak dinner riding on this."

"Help me." The pleading tone descends into a lower timbre. A satisfied purr.

One final trick up my sleeve, or in my pocket. Recently, while browsing a hardware store for a few odds and ends, I came across a relic of my youth—a black light. Cost a ten-spot, on special in the clearance bin. First it made me smile as I recalled how all my childhood friends illuminated their Funkadelic posters, kids as gleeful as if we'd rediscovered alchemy. Later, in college, black light made a comeback on campus and at the parties we attended. It struck a chord, got me thinking, wondering…

Any creature adapted to distort common light sources might be susceptible to *uncommon* sources. Say, infrared or black light. I hazard a guess that my untutored intuition is on the money and that thousands of years of evolution haven't accounted for a ten-dollar device used to find cat-piss stains in the carpet.

I raise the box with the black light filter in my left hand and thumb the toggle. For an instant, I behold the intruder in all its malevolent glory. It recoils from my black light, a segmented hunter of soft prey retreating into its burrow. A dresser crashes in the bedroom. The trailer rocks slightly, then

is quiet. The moment has passed, except for the fresh hell slowly blooming in my head.

The black light surprised it and nothing more. Surprised and amused it. The creature's impossibly broad grin imparted a universe of corrupt wisdom that will scar my mind for whatever time I have left. Mr. Help Me's susurrant chuckle lingers like a psychic stain. Sometimes the spider cuts the fly from its web. Sometimes nature doesn't sink in those red fangs; sometimes it chooses not to rend with its red claws. A reprieve isn't necessarily the same weight as a pardon. Inscrutability isn't mercy.

We Shaws are tough as shoe leather. Doubtless, I've enough juice left in me to crawl for the phone and signal the cavalry. A quart or two of type O and I'll be fighting fit with a story to curl your toes. The conundrum is whether I really want to make that crawl or whether I should close my eyes and fall asleep. *Did you take my dad?* I've spent most of my life waiting to ask that question. Is Dad out there in the dark? What about those hunters and hikers and kids who walk through the door and onto the crime pages every year?

I don't want to die, truly I don't. I'm also afraid to go on living. I've seen the true, unspeakable face of the universe, a face that reflects my lowly place in its scheme. And the answer is yes. Yes, there are hells, and in some you are burned or boiled or digested in the belly of a monster for eternity. Yes, what's left of Dad abides with a hideous mystery. He's far from alone.

What would Clint Eastwood do? Well, he would've plugged the fucker with a .44 Magnum, for starters. I shake myself. Midfifties is too late to turn into a mope. I roll onto my belly, suck in a breath, and begin the agonizing journey toward the coffee table, where I left my purse and salvation. Hand over hand, I drag my scrawny self. It isn't lost on me what I resemble as I slather a red trail across the floor.

Laughing hurts. Hard not to, though. I begin to sing the refrain from "Help!" Over and over and over.

The Blood In My Mouth

This version taken from *The Madness of Cthulhu*, October 2015

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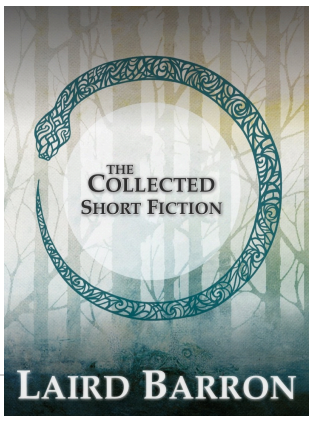

"At first, the sight of death makes you want to puke," my dad said when I was eleven. Without looking, he worked the action of his rifle, chambering a bullet. We crouched in a blind near a swamp. We shared a six-pack of Pabst, waiting on a moose to wander into the killing field. Gnats were fierce, crawling into my collar and ears to bite. Our family hadn't eaten meat in nearly a week.

Years before he'd served with the Marines who overran Hué and lost some other places. He was accustomed to waiting and suffering. "Men cry and scream when they see their buddies shot. After a while you get used to it. Get used to anything, really. You'll be eating a sandwich in the foxhole and a mortar shell explodes nearby and you'll just crawl out of the hole and wipe what's left of the guy next to you off your face to make sure all your own parts are still attached. Then you go right on eating lunch."

A few minutes later a cow moose and her calf ambled into view. He dropped them with his .7mm, bang-bang, and we got busy skinning and quartering amid the swamp stink and the swarming bugs. He whistled while he dragged the guts free into steaming piles as high as my knee and the blood overflowed the toes of our boots. Said we had to work fast and make a lot of noise because a bear would likely come sniffing around the entrails and he'd forgotten to bring the shotgun with the heavy slug loads. Neither of us cared to meet a blackie without the shotgun.

Pop piloted a light cargo plane all across Alaska back in the 1970s. His older brother taught him on a Cessna 174 model. Uncle Mike was laid back; he stuck to the well-traveled air lanes and shook his head over Pop's increasingly daredevil exploits, his obsession with conquering the most dangerous airstrips he could find. Bush piloting in Alaska has always been

an occupation with a high element of what the old-timers call the “pucker factor.” The graybeards also said a man had to know when to get shut of the trade because sooner or later he was bound to crack up for good and no more chances. Didn’t seem to faze Pop, though. Nothing ruffled his feathers. He walked away from two out of three crashes and never had much to say. Two out of three ain’t bad, am I right?

The only time he ever seemed shaken by something that happened on one of his many flights was after a trip over a certain region, remote even by Alaska standards. Pop swore there were monsters swimming in the depths of Lake Iliamna; a whole pod, big as whales—hell, as big as nuclear submarines. He’d seen them as serpentine blurs beneath the surface from his vantage at five thousand feet.

Pop’s description of those pale silhouettes skimming between light and dark stuck in my head. He’d cracked the seal on a bottle of Jim Beam and propped his cowboy boots on the coffee table the way Mom hated. His shaggy hair and mustache were black, his face burnt-copper from the glare, white patches around his eyes from his favorite set of amber-tinted aviator glasses. His teeth were bright white with a couple of gaps. A scar creased his brow. He’d fought a lot in his youth. Violence gave him a measure of joy that he’d lost after the war ended and only discovered again in wilderness flight.

That night I dreamed of paddling the lake in a canoe. I’d not been there in real life, never even seen a picture, so my imagination did the heavy lifting: an inland sea covered in swirls of mist from Arthurian legend, there was no end to it. The canoe sprung a slow leak and icy water sloshed around my ankles, then my shins, coming on fast.

A rotor whined and the shadow of a great bird floated across the void and the voice of darkness spoke into my ear, behind me as if from a distance, yet right there nonetheless. I don’t remember what it said, not sure I *ever* knew on a conscious level. The voice boomed and whispered, a garble of alien tongues and electromagnetic waves, colder than the ice bobbing near the shore. It was in dialogue with my cells. The creepily adult thought occurred to me that I was receiving a message from myself beamed across a gulf between realties. A Bizarro Universe me resonating at peak potential. Maybe it was Pop’s ghost a few years before the fact. Or maybe it was

mine. They say, and I have little reason to quibble, that the universe cycles through itself. It is, as the Lake Iliamna of my dreams, endlessly repeating.

I told Mom the next day that I was going to die on Iliamna when I got old. Mom laughed her nervous laugh and said not to be silly. Wasn't until much later that we were hanging around after Dad's funeral and she got plastered on Scotch and confessed to having the same recurring nightmare during her own youth.

"You dreamed you were going to drown in Lake Iliamna?" I said, also pretty goddamned drunk.

"No, I dreamed my son would." She slugged another double and collapsed in the bathroom. We had to take the door off its hinges to get her out of there.

She returned to Plum Tree, Tennessee, made famous by Robert Service, to be with her mother and sisters in the shade of the most baroquely majestic magnolia you ever did see.

O! Dark days followed with nary a ray of sun to shine on this dog's ass. I lived with one uncle or another until state law cut my traces and then it was cheap apartments and boarding houses, the bunk in a fishing boat or a tent on some godforsaken remote surveying site. I slept under my share of pool tables and overpasses when times were lean. Slept under the cold, pitiless stars enough to have the sentimentality for God and nature and the great unknown seared from me. I think a little gangrene seeped in, though.

It's been thirty years and change and I still hum "Killing an Arab" as I shuffle along the beach with a gun in my hand. When wrath moves me I hum Poe's "Angry Johnny" too, although the life-sustaining rage is gone, drained into the swamp whence it first came bubbling. I stare at the stars, the flat obsidian back of the ocean rolling away toward the moon. The moon gets closer every night.

I died this evening. A hard, bad death. Not the worst thing that's ever happened to me.

Look, back in the day I was crazy too. Quite literally mad in the technical sense—undiagnosed Bipolar One disorder. That's from Mom's side of the

tree. Mood swings like a motherfucker. High as a kite one minute, crashed on the rocks and sinking fast the next. Nobody understood what was going on, least of all me, hick kid from north of the Arctic Circle; holes in my Sorrel boots and chip on my shoulder and not an ounce of introspection to spare. Hate in all its black splendor was my gift. I put that slow-burning rage down to the natural order of things; my people were Scots-Irish with a bit of Comanche in the old pile somewhere. Poverty, stiff-neckedness, and wrath coursed in the blood. Champion grudge holders and enthusiastic brawlers; hard drinkers and hard luck cases, God bless us every one. Never occurred to me it might be something more purely chemical, or something invasive, cancerous. In any event, my youth was one long self-obliterating rampage.

At the nadir of this meteoric descent, the girl of my dreams swooped in for the kill. I was twenty-two, just like the caliber.

First time I met Erica was a few minutes before my participation in an illicit bare-knuckle boxing match in a deserted gravel lot behind the plant where we worked as seasonal labor packing frozen salmon into boxes and shipping them to Japan. The whole seething lot of us was drunk. Those of us who were residents had to be to get through the eighteen-hour workday, the 365 days a year soul-killing sojourn in Alaska. The hangers-on were drunk because it was the only way we could all speak the same language.

She watched me from the edge of the crowd of migrant workers and hobos and boggle-eyed college kids who'd flown up from the continental US to pay their tuition freight and get a bit of seasoning before scuttling back to their daddies' companies and beach houses. A chum rubbed my shoulders while I sat on a bucket and traded devil dog glares with my opponent across the way. Meanwhile, the dayshift foreman took wagers on the back of an envelope and occasionally conferred with his accomplice, the company QA, via walkie talkie. The accomplice lurked down the street of that industrial arena, on the lookout for airport police strayed from their normal cruising territory.

"Great anger I sense in this one," Erica said, sounding like our man Yoda on a bender, but I didn't care. She wore sweats and a tattered Blue Öyster Cult tee a size too large, yet snug nonetheless. Her tits mesmerized me, an anesthetizing image for the beating I was soon to receive. As a friend of

mine commented later, her boobs were like two puppies fighting under a blanket. Thank God, Satan, the great Earth Mother, or whoever imbues certain nubile young women with gravity-defying double Dees and moral retardation. She chugged from a forty bottle of Steel Reserve and her eyes burned like the witchiest-bitchiest of Dracula's brides appraising the latest dinner guest.

Well.

Guy named Red from the loading dock had agreed to be my opponent. Nothing personal, the guy had a heart of gold; like everybody else, he just needed the scratch. Red was a tough kid on loan from Miami; a survivor of gang turf wars. The scars on his barrel chest and pylon legs were thick as horse brands gone wrong. He slung two-hundred-and-fifty-pound boxes of fish into shipping containers for his daily bread. A behemoth with fists the circumference and density of cinderblocks. Me, I was underweight, though wiry as a feral dog. The usual mismatch. I fought monsters in the pits. The brutes who were as mean as me, but bigger and better fed. There just weren't any other takers. Nobody in his right mind willingly fights a man who's in it for the pain. The taste of blood in my mouth was an old friend.

On the other hand, Money talks, yes it does, and to look at me was to underestimate the power of rage and primitive impulse. So Red and I went at it hammer and tongs there in the middle of the lot on a hundred-degree afternoon in July, our supporters shouting nonsensical encouragement while everybody else hooted and jeered and tried not to get splashed by blood and spit—most of the blood was mine. If not for the ring of truck grills I would've rolled out of there, a cartoon character shot from a cannon. Instead, Red settled for smashing me into the ground.

Luckily, the airport police received a tip about a street fight and a gathering mob and sent a patrol car to investigate. The QA lookout radioed the foreman and warned everybody to scram. Red stopped slamming my head against the bumper of a rusted Ford and took to his heels. Who would think a dude so girthy could flee with the agility of a deer? Our happy crew scattered, the match called on account of the fuzz. Final tally on my ledger was a missing tooth, rearranged nose, and a concussion that lingered for nearly two weeks. Also minus the seventy-five bucks I'd put down on

myself. Yeah, I was a little closer every day to remaking myself into Pop's image. All I had left to do was to make sure I died young.

Erica took me to her apartment and licked my wounds. I guess that put me in the black.

She strapped on the goggles, tipped the sake, and went kamikaze from day zero of our relationship.

Vodka, the cheaper the better.

Black Beauties and Microdot.

Ouija boards.

Tantric sex in a big way.

More vodka.

Choking games. The hard end of the belt.

Violence, yeah. Lots of violence. Feral or not, I was a pussycat by comparison to my new girlfriend. For her, drop of a hat and it was go time.

One cold September evening we packed a bottle of Stoli and a blanket that belonged to her late great dog Achilles and cruised to a bonfire/windsurfing party at Settler's Bay where she wound up beating the tar out of some poor surfer chick over territorial pissing. When the chick's boyfriend stepped in, Erica socked him too. Her fistful of death's head and gemstone rings made a sweet little knuckleduster that tore the guy's face wide open. I had to drag her back to the truck before the mob of surfer dudes and dudettes stomped us.

She slid aside her panties and fucked me on the drive home. No mean feat considering how cramped the cab of that half-ton pickup was. I almost flew my rig off the twisty road between Knik and Wasilla more than once. Girl was totally insane. Honky-tonk blues blasting on the radio, her nipple in my mouth, her face pressed into the roof of the cab, hands in my hair, both of my own hands clamped on her ass instead of the wheel, a hundred miles an hour in the dark.

I was young enough not to understand, arrogant enough not to care.

She dyed her hair so often I didn't figure out she was blonde for the first six months. Taller than me and curvy, but sort of muscular. She'd played soccer and rugby at college. Wouldn't tell me her major. I'm not going to say what school because it doesn't matter. College was over for her by a couple of years and I'd never gone. Her nose was a tiny bit crooked from getting broken during a scrum. Sexy, though, unlike my own near disfigurement.

Her family roots were Welsh and she had something of the moors about her; an aura of mystery. Pale as winter sand, she bruised easily. She favored rugby sweaters and track pants or old ripped jeans with bloodstains ground in most of the time; autumn colors. Funky glittery eye-shadow but no lip gloss, no perfume. I got to know her scent the way dogs do with one another. A soap and water girl. Mine, for a while, then through my fingers like the blood from my mouth after one of life's sucker punches.

Good thing pain is my thing.

Between and during marathon bouts of sex and booze we dropped blotter and listened to The Toadies, Poe, and The Cure. A hell of a lot of The Cure, I remember that. "A Forest" was my theme in those days. Erica possessed eclectic taste in the arts. She jolted me out of my redneck roots with Bob Dylan, Procul Harum, Linda Ronstadt, The Clash. Bosch, Bacon, Dalí, and Pollock at his maddest. *Don Quixote* was her novel of novels; *The Wizard of Oz* was her movie. *Oz* for the deleted scenes, the Hanged Man legend, the febrile luminescence of Judy Garland's flesh, the deep space chill of her eyes like something written by Clark Ashton Smith.

That fucking guy. Erica introduced me to Smith's work via a ratty paperback anthology she toted in her knapsack. Told me CAS had been her mom and dad's fave author since the Stone Age, that his baroque nihilism brought them together when they were undergrads at university. She preferred H. P. Lovecraft, although she didn't elaborate why.

Her little brother Isaiah died in a theme park accident. That was an off-limits topic. We talked about God, the cosmos, mankind's minute presence

in the infinite sea of flaming gas, and absolute zero, the meaning of it all, nothing really important.

Sometimes after pounding a boilermaker or two I'd dream again, a rare occurrence since my nightmares of Iliamna. In the distance reared a city with spires of dirty-black ice surmounted by clouds of gas that boiled upward through a hole into outer space. Others were of a Ferris Wheel on fire and rolling across a dawn plain like the wheel of the Death God's Chariot come loose. Erica loomed, tall as a skyscraper, watching the wheel go. Her skin glowed faintly, reflecting fire and flickers of distant lightning. A whip made of barbed wire and logging chain hung from her fist, gouged a furrow into the earth when she turned and strode toward me until the sun unfolded over her shoulder and struck me blind.

She asked me once if I *ever* won any of my fights.

"All of them," I said. "Except the one against the Law. It won."

"Moral victories are draws at best."

"What can I say? Pyrrhic Victories R Us. Masada is my handbook for daily living."

We were on the road to see her parents at their place in Moose Pass, a tiny town a few minutes north of Seward. This was late March and bitter cold, making the journey a perilous one. Together for nine months and I still didn't know much. Such essential cluelessness would prove a recurring life theme.

All along Erica had been cagey regarding her family, choosing to change the subject whenever the conversation swung around to her childhood. Then, in a bolt from the heavens, after giving me an impassioned and impromptu blow job at the Wendy's Drive-Thru, she paused to stare at herself in the rearview mirror. Her expression was strange. She declared that perhaps the time was nigh to pay homage at court. Her eyes glittered with that light I'd initially attributed to mischievousness and booze. Full on devilry, full on insanity more like.

Thus, three days later, we were bundled into the cab of my old truck and slip-sliding along the treacherous Seward Highway while the wind buffeted and the snow whirled and The Fixx sang about how one thing leads to another. She gave me my mission briefing along the way.

Erica called her folks Rob and Willy (short for Wilhelmina) and seemed rather conflicted about them. I had the feeling she adored and hated them in equal measure. They were retired government workers who lived in a doublewide trailer at the Emperor Penguin Court, had once owned a mansion and a spread in Southern California but moved north due to job opportunities and fear of earthquakes. Of course, the Coleridges were to be disappointed on the latter front, as Alaska got rocked by more earthquakes than any other state in the Union. Land of Ten Thousand Smokes, leading edge of the Pacific Rim's fabled Ring of Fire.

I wondered if she had any special advice for me—any inflammatory topics to veer away from? Any pet peeves to avoid petting by mistake? She laughed and told me to act however I wanted. Her parents didn't give a shit. Willy and Rob inhabited their own private universe. This was just a day pass. She made me pull into a supermarket on the outskirts of Anchorage to snag steaks and salad. Her parents didn't keep food in the house, only liquor. She wasn't sure if they could stomach solid food, but it was worth a try.

We arrived at the Coleridge manse in one piece and I felt right the hell at home. A dead Christmas tree lay in the front yard where Rob had chucked it to make room for company. The wreath still hung on the front door, the cheap lights still twinkled in the eaves. Thick shag rugs in every room but the kitchen and bathroom; velvet hangings of voluptuous nudes reclining among prides of lions juxtaposed a black-and-white poster of Carl Sagan behind the television and a gaudy painting of a Mayan ziggurat enveloped in purple lightning made one hell of sensory-shocking triptych on the living room wall.

Erica wasn't kidding about the no-food situation. Liquor bottles crammed every cabinet. Empties overflowed the wastebaskets, milk crates of them were piled in the hall. When her parents weren't looking, Erica nodded at me and flipped open the oven. More empty bottles.

"Holy shit," I said, impressed.

Rob and Willy were moles recently emerged from a subterranean habitat: pale and soft and dressed in pajamas. Their thick eyeglasses reflected the meager light. The couple spent six months of the year at a timeshare condo

Rob had finagled during happier times. Both were semi-expert blackjack players and haunted the Vegas Strip, guzzling comped booze and winning and losing meager fortunes until it was time to migrate north and hibernate again.

According to Erica, the pair usually woke around mid-afternoon and started drinking to kill the previous night's hangover and played innumerable hands of twenty-one, each armed with a mason jar of pennies and nickels to cover their wagers. The drinking and gambling ritual wasn't interrupted by our arrival. Erica sprawled on the couch and watched me sip tallboys and get snared into a marathon blackjack session. I took them for fourteen dollars in change. Willy scoffed when I attempted to decline the loot. She stuffed all those coins into a sock and made Erica put it in her purse. I didn't argue. Much as it pained me to exploit a couple of pickled geezers, I needed the gas money.

For a while nobody said much, and I got the distinct impression Erica wasn't exactly in their good graces, nor had lugging home a ne'er-do-well such as myself done much to improve the climate. It was so frigid in the trailer we could've used the services of one of those icebreaker ships. A golf tournament played on TV and the clock radio was tuned to college basketball, both of which the Coleridges had money riding on. Willy dealt the cards, occasionally pausing to lean toward the commentary, swear under her breath, and scratch totals into a ratty notebook. Rob kept the booze coming and responded to Erica's queries about the recent blizzards and frozen water pipes with grunts and shrugs. He seldom lifted his bleary gaze from the table, studying the array of cards with tremendous intensity.

During a break in the action, while the couple exchanged monosyllabic insults over some point of contention, either regarding blackjack or the broadcasts, I wasn't clear, Erica spirited me away to her old room. I gathered it sat untouched since she originally left for college. Kind of dusty and cobwebby and it smelled stale, although not bad after the cigarette smoke stench that permeated the rest of the trailer. Admittedly, I was curious to learn more about my woman of mystery.

The fossil record of a typical childhood: Lite Brite and Etch-a-Sketch and stars painted on the ceiling; stacks of *Cosmopolitan* and *Seventeen* and a poster of Mick Jagger as a sweet young thing. A trove of costume jewelry

gleamed atop the vanity and at the foot of the single bed was a dog pillow, leash, and collar. The rabies vaccination tag on the collar said Achilles. She kept a picture of Achilles in a locket around her neck: a family scene in the woods—Erica ten or eleven, Rob and Willy in mackinaws and hip waders, and the dog at their feet. A brute with lots of teeth and a lolling tongue. Made me think of White Fang. No sign of brother Isaiah, oddly enough.

"Man, when did you move out?" I said, eyeing a particolored DNA model and slide rule gathering dust next to a stuffed panda that appeared to be a prize from some Alaska State Fair of yore. I edged away, paranoid she might try to make a move on me there in that musty tomb. The wheels were always turning in her brain, powering a carousel of agendas. Shagging me ten feet from the kitchen while her parents swilled liquor and squabbled over point spreads was just her kind of kink, but a bridge too far for my taste.

"After Achilles died. A long time ago." That peculiar light inhabited her eyes again. She cocked her head in manner reminiscent of Willy's habitual gesture, listening to her parents' muffled argument, the faint exclamations of the announcers. "I went to college ahead of schedule. Full ride, so why not? Anything to get the hell away from here."

"Yeah, you and your full ride. What was it for, anyway?" I'd asked before; this time she humored me.

"I wrote a paper. Some stuffed shirts liked it. Voilà."

I hefted the DNA model. "Must've been a hell of a paper."

"Yep. It detailed the effects of bong hits of Matanuska Thunderfuck on the female adolescent libido. Where are you going? Why are you trying to escape?"

She was smart, that I knew, despite the fact she preferred to show the world a bruiser and boozer persona. Smart isn't even the right term—brilliant, genius, savant… Pick one of those and you'd be closer the mark. Erica had a photographic memory. List a sequence of phone numbers, book passages, whatever, she'd roll her eyes and recite them in a mechanical voice that sounded like the computerized time and temp recording. She could quote the entire dialogue of any film she'd ever seen, and did so on occasion

when she was in the mood to drive me batshit. One of her favorite moods, in fact.

She had a will to self-destruction—that was the problem. If not destruction, definitely a kind of violent apathy. I was afraid to dig much deeper. Afraid and selfish. See, I liked how things were going between us for the most part. She didn't care that I was broke and without prospects. A low-maintenance chick in regards to material objects. Stupid, callow me, I thought that was a bargain. I recognized the Devil and the deep blue sea, but not that I was caught between them or that the water was rising like in that old Johnny Cash song or my dream of canoeing the lake.

"Did you know we're made of dead stars?" she said. "We're always sloughing off detritus and rebuilding ourselves. Every ten years you're basically a brand new person."

I admitted to not knowing that factoid.

"Ah, so. Then you should also know I've done something to you. Not me, my electromagnetic field is kind of… Well it's kind of fucked up, I guess you'd say. My best bet is, yours is fubar too. CTD… cosmically transmitted disease. Osmosis, sweetie. We destroy the ones we love."

She caught me and stuck her tongue in my ear and had my belt mostly unlooped before I could react. Then she pushed me away, laughed, and said, "What, you think I'd fuck you in my old bedroom while my parents are sitting outside? Get real, dude." She walked back into the kitchen, left me standing there with my pants down and a raging hard-on.

Willy sobered enough to sear the steaks on a griddle, and Rob found a mismatched set of glasses to fill with a nice Chablis they'd set aside for the occasion, and for a few minutes we sat around the rickety table in the 1960s kitchen and enjoyed a quiet dinner almost like a regular family. I got the feeling it was the first time in ages for any of us.

After the dishes were cleared, Rob turned his yellowed eyes on me and said, "So, kid. Any big plans?"

Erica clenched her knife and smiled at her dad. "Don't do it."

"She means it, Robert," Willy said, lighting a cigarette. Her dreamy tone sharpened into something menacing.

“Ah, come on. He’s sniffing around my daughter like a hound dog. Be nice to know if his intentions are honorable.”

“Your daughter can take care of herself,” Willy said. “It’s the boy we should worry about.”

“What’s to worry about? Erica, you break the news to Fido here? Bet not, judging by the sappy expression he’s wearing.”

Willy said, “Robert, shut your mouth. Honey, put the knife down.”

Rob laughed a nasty drunken laugh, but he shut up and focused on his empty plate.

Erica set the knife aside. She stood and grabbed her coat. She said to me, “Let’s go.”

I didn’t argue. Two feet of fresh snow piled on the road, and beneath that, black ice. Seemed a safer prospect than remaining in the trailer for the imminent brouhaha.

White-knuckled the one-hundred-plus-mile drive home. Made it safe and sound, although, as Rob might’ve opined, that simply delayed the inevitable.

Spring came creeping on muddy little muskrat feet, and we spent a long afternoon chucking crap from the apartment into the bed of my truck for a garbage run. When Erica tossed a box of her old journals and the high-powered telescope onto the pile, my ears pricked up. She kept the telescope near the sliding door to the back deck and used it to watch the stars on clear nights. She frequently jotted notes into a logbook. I asked what the notes were for, and she ruffled my hair and told me to crack another beer like a good boy.

I couldn’t help but feel her mood to purge was bound to include me sooner or later. Among the outgoing was a photo album. Pictures of the family in various California settings, one of Rob dressed in a suit giving a lecture at a packed assembly hall with the NASA seal on the wall behind his podium. He was lean and sharp, mouth twisted in wrath, index finger stabbing toward the camera. Definitely not the wasted, basted guy I’d recently met. I

hid it in a footlocker with my old collection of pulp and western paperbacks. In the back of my mind I was thinking she'd be grateful someday. Even farther back, nearer my animal part, lurked some nameless motivation, a longing, and fear.

Alaska is a damned big, empty place bordered by Nowhere. Between frigid temperatures and snowfalls ass-deep to a giraffe, it has the weapons to kill anything more complex than a rock. Civilization exists in tiny, disenfranchised pockets surrounded by a howling void. Basically, it's the universe in microcosm.

There's always been plenty of tinfoil hat theories and superstitious legends to go along with all that frozen tundra—lost radar sites fronting for secret nuclear launch silos aimed at Russia; FEMA concentration camps for the inevitable apocalypse; UFO observation bases; etc, etc.

One day I was reading an article in the paper about the HAARP Project and the author's claim about how, instead of improving communication or navigation systems, the device was actually a bunker-busting ray being prepared for deployment against the various militia compounds scattered across the state. I laughed and pointed it out to Erica, hoping to josh her out of the funk she'd fallen into for the past several weeks.

Didn't have the effect I'd hoped for—instead, she stared at the article, then at me with that laser-beam intensity she saved for her more sadistic moments. Her eyes were puffy. She'd abruptly stopped drinking and taking dope, which might've signaled a positive development under normal circumstances or with a normal person. Alas, this was altogether different with her; it heralded a deeper, more ominous stage of whatever she was going through. She said, "Well, of course that's bullshit. It's probably something worse. There's always something worse."

We didn't talk for nearly a week. I worked days at a construction site, hauling sheetrock and digging trenches. I'd drag ass home to a TV dinner and a six-pack of suds while she hunched at the opposite end of the couch, still dressed in her PJs, glued to *Nova.* I didn't have a clue what to say, so I slumped in my work clothes and drank silently while fear burrowed ever

deeper and made its nest in my brain. When feverish sleep enfolded me, I dreamed of drowning and of fire.

Finally, it came to a head. Erica kicked me out of bed before dawn and herded me to the truck while the sky was still slashed with stars. She refused to answer questions except to say we were going on a picnic; told me to shut my trap and drive. I did, still half drunk, eyes swollen mostly shut. Occasionally I stole glances at her—she was bundled in a dark flannel coat and a knitted cap and she wore a pair of wraparound sunglasses, rendering her expression inscrutable.

Daylight burned away the shadows as we climbed onto the gravel access road that winds through Hatcher Pass. In the sourdough days there were hard rock mines and a series of tough and tumble camps. In my time the mines were long gone and the territory was deserted but for moose and fox and the ptarmigans that roosted in the crags and among the patches of tough alder and willow. Tourists from the Lower Forty-eight flocked to the hills in July to photograph the Dahl sheep that capered along the cliffs. Magnificent beasts, those sheep. As a kid, I saw one of the poor fuckers, a big old ram ambling in the sun, trip on a loose rock and plummet into a crevasse, and I wondered if any of the goddamned tourists had ever caught a pic of that side of Mother Nature. The Alaska they don't show you on the travel brochures.

She made me park on the shoulder of the road. From there we scrambled down and walked across a field of tundra and moss and blueberry bushes that wouldn't flower for a few weeks yet. The sun scorched us as it rolled over the peak, and a sharp breeze whistled through the looming icecaps and reminded me that the deathly hand of winter never truly departed the northlands; it only withdrew up its own sleeve, biding for the short span of summer to end.

I was getting nervous. This being Alaska (and me a paranoid, delusional fuck), murder/rape capital per capita of the US, and famous for people blowing a fuse and whacking whole towns, my animal self went on red alert, not so casually scrutinizing her every move, half expecting her to swing up the .38 auto I knew she stashed in her dresser and take a crack at me. Why would she do such a thing, you might wonder? Didn't need to be a

motive. Not in AK. Strange things were done in the Land of the Midnight Sun and only the Devil knew why.

Erica walked in front, a rucksack slung over her shoulder. Sack had a faded red hobo patch on the side. She'd packed chicken sandwiches and wine. The bottles clinked as she picked her way across an icy stream, hopping from rock to rock to keep her boots dry. She moved with the ungainly grace of a raven and when she glanced over her shoulder at me, her eyes were diamond cold as the eyes of the totem in front of Wasilla City Hall.

Atop a big flat rock that teetered near the precipice of a gulf into blue mist we made our stand and had the first bottle of eight-dollar wine, and after it was gone, or mostly, she scared me by suddenly cupping her hands to her mouth and shouting for Achilles over and over. "He's out here, somewhere," she said, taking my silence for inquiry. "Rob said a dog couldn't make the trip, that the chemical composition of the doggie brain made it a no go. I figured he was lying. Rob would definitely lie. He hated Achilles." She called for a long time.

For one brief, giddy, hysterical moment her hollering for the ghost dog was too goddamned much to endure and I thought of pushing her over the edge. Quick boot to the ass was all it would've taken. Doesn't everybody have that thought, though? That morbid fantasy of how easy it'd be shiv a loved one in his or her sleep, to slip drain cleaner into his or her soup, to shove him or her off a ledge. Isn't it related to that freaky impulse to hurl ourselves off ledges, to spin the wheel of our sports car into the path of a dump truck? To fall in love?

Eventually I asked her what we were doing there on the side of the mountain. She rested her hands on her knees and regarded me. Her face was flushed. She said, "I'm trying to remember where it is."

"Where *what* is?"

"*Our* Plymouth Rock. *Our* Northwest Passage. My father's New World. It's right around here, somewhere. Too early to hit the next bottle?"

"Your folks wouldn't say so."

"Cut the comedy. You ain't no Bill Hicks, boy."

I took the final swallow of the wine as a tribute to the departed legend. “Baby, what the hell is going on?”

“I’m trying to explain. Ever notice I spell Kalifornia with a K?”

“Yeah, and you cross your sevens like the Europeans. Kinda fancy for a chick from the trailer park, but who am I to judge, huh?”

“Um, hm. You think it’s an affectation.”

“I don’t know what that word means.”

“Rob and Willy were big wheels in Kalifornia. The government took care of everything—that’s how important Mom and Pop were. Their brains were so powerful they could squash you with mind power. We were rich bitches back in Kal. Back in Kal I had a nanny, three tutors, a bodyguard/driver named Beasley, my own private rugby field. Back in Kal, Beasley drove me to an exclusive school in an armor-plated Cadillac. Back in Kal my pals were baby diplomats and shithead junior CEOs in training bras. The Secretary of State and a bunch of his cronies flocked to Rob’s barbecues. I spelled my own name with a K. Erika. Oh, what a scene it was, in Kal. Only problem was, we were all doomed. Voyager broadcasting its dinner bell wasn’t the brightest idea mankind ever had. First contact didn’t turn out so great. Turned out kind of like when driver ants march through the jungle munching every living thing that doesn’t get clear fast. We didn’t even get the fancy technological gifts or the fucking cookbook. Then again, what do you expect from a species that seeps down from cracks between the stars, huh?” As she spoke she loomed over me and a static charge built in the folds of my clothes and my hair stood on end.

I’d read a smidgeon of Nietzsche. I recognized an abyss when I saw one. Her eyes gave me vertigo, scared me in that instant a thousand times to the power of ten more than anything CAS or HPL ever said. I was an animal in the presence of a dark wonder, and all my masochistic resilience, my uncanny talent for taking a punch to the mouth, couldn’t help me now.

“No, baby, nothing can help you now,” she said. “Everything you believe is a lie. It’s bullshit down to the quark. Come on. Let’s keep walking.”

We kept walking, and walking. Picked our way downslope until we arrived in the shadow of an overhanging cliff. Here was a hollow much obliterated by high school graffiti and shards of busted beer bottles from many

campfire parties. Farther back was an aperture and a set of rusted metal doors thrown wide to reveal a moldy tunnel into darkness. It put me in mind of a bomb shelter, although I wasn't aware of any such structure in the region—the nearest bunkers were quietly crumbling a thousand miles south in the Aleutians.

"X marks the spot," she said and gripped my wrist with bone crushing force. She gestured with her free hand, illustrating the scene: "Rob didn't invent the technology. Smart, not *that* smart. Uncle Cahart made the breakthrough—not really my uncle, he was just around so much, too bad the coot didn't make it through before… well, oh well. Nah, Rob is an opportunist, a two-legged coyote. He put apple and pi together and saw our way out of a super-bad situation."

I didn't understand and told her so. Erica shrugged and said she didn't either except in the vaguest sense. Quantum physics wasn't her area of expertise like Rob, or particle physics like Willy. Blow jobs and lit theory, yeah. She said, "Isaiah died two weeks before Uncle Cahart threw the switch on his supercollider Tesla coil space and time machine. Two damned weeks. Yeah. What say we lay our coats down and do it on glass? You game?" Her diamond eyes were glossy. Had she ever cried in front of me? Hell if I could remember.

"Let me think on it—no." The bunker, the burned-out fires and spray paint scrawls reminded me of something. A legend or a curse that evaporated when I tried to haul it into the light. Something about a weird place the kids went to on a dare, an abandoned government lab where the ET's still visited in their saucers.

She said, "Oops, I forgot to tell you not to wear that watch. It's royally screwed. Now, lookee here. I've gotten closer and closer. I'm getting good."

And while I tapped the blank quartz face of my suddenly non-functioning timepiece, she walked right up to the threshold of the doors and bowed her head and spread her arms in a Jesus Christ pose.

Pebbles rattled and began to rise along with shards of glass and small sticks. This mass revolved around her in a funnel that continued to extend vertically. A shadow covered Erica's face, and she slowly levitated until her shoe tips lifted from the ground. A black nimbus radiated from her the way

bad reception on TV sometimes causes images to distort, and the entrance to the bunker warped and opened wider and I glimpsed flecks of stars turning and turning and got an impression that photocopies of my love were stacked atop one another and spiraling outward toward the galactic core. Then I shouted and she fell in a hail of glass and stones and the shadow whisked from her and she opened her eyes and stared at me. Blood made snail trails from her eyes, nose, and ears. She seemed oblivious to that. “Do you see? Do you see?”

I couldn’t speak. A foot between us, a million light years between us. The wind blew cold between us and a belt of coagulated stars sludged by. Whirling in *my* brain this time.

She swept her hand across her face and, like a magician pulling a trick, the clouds parted and she smiled brilliantly, and oh it matched her eyes. “This was a stupid idea. Go ahead and assume I forgot to take my meds.”

“Sure, baby,” I said. In hindsight I should’ve said something else.

She left me a few days after the Hatcher Pass incident. Left everyone.

I crawled in from a ballbuster of a day and there was a note pinned to the fridge. *Going to get my dog. Love, E.* She left everything behind except her backpack and survival goodies, and the pistol. Probably hitched her way along the Parks Highway. None of our friends had seen her. Fortunately for me, a market video caught her buying bottled water and sundries in Palmer while I was miles away on a job. Because you know there were a lot of questions when she never returned. No answers but the tick of the clock in my room, the wind rubbing against the walls.

The Pixies spoke of a wave of mutilation. More like a wave of disintegration. The crack that runs through everything reaches across all time and space, travels jaggedly through all past and all potentiality. It is the slow fracture in the ice, the worm coring its way through the apple, coring the human heart. It is the following shadow.

I continued onward for years and years. Got married, if you can believe it. And to a wonderful woman who was far too good for me. It lasted longer than it had any right to, long enough that when the marriage collapsed with tears and recriminations so ended my always tenuous connection to humanity. I wandered the earth, snarling, claws out.

My body was totaled by this point. Bad back, arthritis of everything, tinnitus in one ear, bum knee, and chronic fatigue. I was scarred and scorched from sun and wind, the blows of daily travails. Crawling out of my bedroll each morning was a fifteen-minute session of alternately begging and cursing God. I started drinking in earnest, staggering from one series of dead-end labor jobs to the next. I withered until I became my essential self, a brute and a beast.

One night in a saloon in Dutch Harbor I got shanked while arguing with two locals over cards. A guy in a red and black lumberjack shirt stuck me with a serrated skinning knife, twice. Felt about the same as a light blow from a fist against my ribs, except so much deeper and colder. The joint was hopping, The Charlie Daniels Band booming from the speakers, sawdust and blurry strings of light, sloshing beer and my blood pouring down my leg and into my boot. Nobody paid me a lick of mind.

I walked outside and kept on going off the end of the boardwalk. This was late summer, so the big, rounded hills bordering the port were slowly vanishing beneath gauzy purple brushstrokes, but the sea and sky mirrored one another in a white blaze. I sat abruptly in a ditch, the tractor that dug it cold and still a few feet away, and gazed into the muck and scum that lay upon the bottom. The two fellows from the tavern came upon me there and kicked me until I lay face down in the mud. One of them held my ankles while the other stood on my neck.

I didn’t struggle as much as you might suppose. Too weak, too sad, too sick of the whole rigmarole.

After what seemed an age, I climbed up out of the ditch and watched the murderers with their victim. As in the saloon, none paid me any heed. I turned west and moved like an arrow to the night water.

Yes, I searched for her all those years ago when she vanished into the ether. Of course I searched. She was my love. I drove along dark and desolate highways and winding dirt back roads, checking every culvert, every ditch. I prowled unlighted paths among the black spruce of hill and marsh.

I returned to Hatcher Pass and retraced the steps that led us into the shadow of the mountain vault. Nothing inside except dust and guano, the remnants of hobo fires. I could've sworn the soot had crystallized upon one wall as the silhouette of a person in profile. My flashlight was dying and I had to leave.

Home again, I got wasted and lay around flipping through her photo album. The plastic was so cold it burned my fingers. Toward the back were several pages of pictures that obviously had been shot on a Hollywood film set; some kind of blockbuster fantasy-science fiction mashup. Hovercars, soldiers in bubble helmets toting elaborate rayguns, gargantuan and baroque structures. A weird-ass moon that dominated the sky in a sickening fashion.

The phone rang. Rob was on the line. He sounded way drunk, yet unnervingly lucid. "There's nothing back there where we came from. A skeleton world in a universe sliding toward heat death. It was the end of days. *They* arrived and they ate everybody. Kid, you hearing me?"

I was hearing him, unfortunately. I chugged booze right from the neck and that didn't help.

He said, "You gotta die to go back an' if you go back you die. She went back and she's dead." He was silent, then he sobbed and I heard the unmistakable clatter of glass against glass and ice cubes spinning like lotto balls. "This place doesn't possess the technology to build what we'd need… and the only man in this universe or the next who could put it all together had his brains vacuumed out a trillion light years from here. If I had the Machine, I'd go find her. Believe it, kid."

I waited him out. Then I said in a voice thick with grief and alcohol poisoning, "Could I do it?"

"Do what?"

"Could I… walk to wherever she went? She thought I might be able to."

“Sure. Sure, you could. Gotta understand that your physical body won’t make the trip. It’s them twenty-one grams constituting the primal you that will pull the freight. Boy, just don’t. You’ll be dissolved like a tab of antacid in the guts of a whale. The real you, snuffed. Or worse, you’ll make the crossing and reach where we fled from.” He stopped and sobbed uncontrollably. Finally he said goodbye and hung up. We never spoke again.

I step onto the sea and begin to walk toward distant twin hemispheres cresting the horizon. One black, one white. They radiate fearsome energy and a sound—angels, devils, damned souls, singing and screaming. I am a seed floating within the grip of a current, capable of steering down one fork in the stream or the other, and little more.

I choose the black sun because it’s a cavity in reality and it’s where she went a billion years ago, thirty years ago, seconds ago. Passing through the portal is to step through a doorway into the violence of a blizzard, a blast furnace. The angels and the demons chorus and if I had blood and flesh it would surely boil from every millimeter of me.

Then for an eon there is the void, smooth and cool as the barrel of a rifle. I sail weightless at a velocity greater than the speed of light. I am a tachyon knifing through the fibers of space and time, a star hurled from the hand of a vengeful god toward the heart of everything. I am drawn with inexorable finality toward her spark in the endless gulf of night.

I fall from the sky with the impact of a meteor and find myself trudging through the ruins of a forest. All is gray and cold. Ash swirls around me, lies in a thigh-deep blanket upon the ground. Great trees have been uprooted and scattered. This is Tunguska. Perhaps not my Tunguska, but someone’s nonetheless. After a while I leave the forest and enter a plain. It too is covered in ash. Mountains rise in the distance, and the outlines of the Cyclopean city from my nightmares. No longer walking, I’m projected forward like a thought.

She awaits me atop a foothill in the shadow of the range. She is as I remember her. Her flesh is cold as arctic ice, her eyes… And the inimitable

Achilles crouches at her side. The beast is red and black. His gaze is the gaze of the basilisk.

She smiles and reaches toward me. Her whisper carries across the gulf. “You made it.”

I want to say that I love her, have always loved her, will always love her, here and in every universe. But the sky blackens directly overhead and I think of Damocles and of the man in red plaid, his boot descending to crush my life.

Her finger brushes my lips, shushing me. She embraces me and says, “Don’t say anything and maybe it’ll stay like this forever.”

I’m a fool, but not a damn fool and I keep my mouth shut. So maybe it does.

The Cyclorama

This version taken from *License Expired*, 2015
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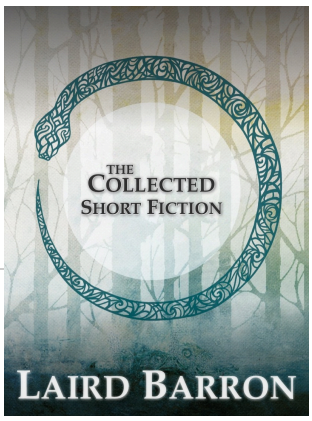


Red light drips. Red light spreads.

…a phantom orchestra plays on. For an instant, you are overcome with the sensation you've forgotten something vital. An exquisitely proportioned woman in a string bikini approaches. She waves. You wave back. Your first and last mistake of an otherwise brilliant afternoon.

The blow you never see coming is as heavy as a straight right from a boxer. A dart's red feather protrudes from your breast. Venom trickles straight for your heart. Rare for you to be taken by surprise. Yet, here you are, undone. The woman in the string bikini lowers her weapon. She divides; two, now three, now four. Her figures reflect the sun. Her multiples blaze and revolve as a carousel.

You stagger, then fall face down into the sand, and farther.

On the day you are summoned to the inner sanctum for promotion, M pours "Infuriator" from a fresh bottle. "Double-0. Born to kill. Commanded to die well. Our double-0s are incredibly precious, eminently expendable resources. Remember you're a blunt instrument and you'll succeed marvellously."

"I presume I'm not the first Double-0-Seven," you say, accepting the wine. Cheap. "That's how this works, isn't it? I'm filling some unlucky chap's boots."

The older man frowns. "Son, you don't understand. It has always been you, only you. It always shall be."

One sweltering night in Monte-Carlo finds you at a baccarat table playing *chemin-de-fer* and winning big. You sip a perfect martini placed in your hand by a lovely girl in a blue dress. You puff a Morland, triple gold band. Spectators contract around your chair. The crowd, breathless with lust, heeds your command of the shoe.

Wagers accumulate and crest at significant threat to the financial health of those within the betting circle. Your heart quickens as it does when you press a performance car to its limit, or scale a dangerous peak, or hear the report of small arms fire at close range, or undress a beautiful woman as guards with submachine guns pace nearby grounds, hunting for intruders, for *you*. Terror and ecstasy intertwine, are inseparable. You have always taken your pleasures as they come and casually discard them without a second glance. This is the chief reason among many why the Secret Service values you so dearly. The ability to crystallize your instincts and emotions to pure, cold calculation and exist solely in the moment is a rare gift. You are a lethal-thinking animal. SS command will be sorry to see you go, as eventually you must. Mandatory forty-five is the watchword and it fast approaches.

The croupier sits across the table, impassive as death. A debonair industrialist plucks his pencil moustache and confers with a pair of sinister bullyboys. An American film actor seethes and smirks. To the actor's left, an icy woman in a daring gown and too many diamonds adjusts her lipstick while watching you covetously. Dr. Howard Hemlock, inscrutable behind black glasses, folds his hands and waits. The others blur into the cigarette haze, unimportant. One or all of them might be enemies. Their names are lost in the clink of ice cubes, the rattle of roulette balls, and soft applause that spreads across the casino the way a breeze shushes through jungle canopy.

You glance down at your glassful of blood. *How am I not dead?*

As the propaganda proclaims, it's not a job, it's a lifestyle.

Squash and badminton. Extravagant meals and gambling at five star hotels. Worsted suits and Grenadine ties. Lush, nubile socialites and silk sheets. All

expenses paid, naturally. Sometimes tedium rules—the tedium of excess, of answering to another man's name, of always waiting the precise moment to strike. Waiting to be discovered and unmasked. Sometimes there is violence. Torture, mayhem, explosions. You've shot down foreign agents, henchmen, and women. Once, you killed a tiger shark near the Great Barrier Reef with a Fairbairn-Sykes commando knife. You also used that knife to eliminate enemy divers of various nationalities.

Occasionally, there is strangeness.

You are dispatched to a town in the south of France. Colonel Ranger with the *Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage* drives you deep into the countryside. Like you, the Colonel dresses simply—jacket, work pants, and boots. He is heavy and soft and clinically ruthless. He smokes Gauloises and is happy to share them. You both toured Africa and are immediately comfortable with one another.

Colonel Ranger visits a series of wheat fields. Each is defaced by crop circles of varied, albeit invariably bizarre, geometric design. More disturbing, three of the farms lost entire coops of chickens. One hundred and ninety bird carcasses without a mark. Poison? Laboratory tests will determine the answer. The vandalism occurred in the dead of night. Neither the farmers nor their neighbours witnessed anything unusual. You listen closely, observe dispassionately, and conclude these reports to be honest. These people are frightened.

The fifth and sixth farms are the sites of cattle mutilations. As with the massacred poultry, several cows lie slaughtered by unknown means. Random organs are removed. Everything is done precisely. Whoever the perpetrators are, they expertly covered their tracks. A hired hand claims to have seen unusual lights on the hillside for three nights of the previous week.

"Planes don't move that way," the farmhand says, clutching a wine bottle. He lies in a heap of dirty straw. He reeks of manure and vino. "Planes don't. Balloons neither. Police tell us weather balloons. They are full of shit."

"He's right," Ranger says as you are pulling away from the scene. "We've taken three dozen reports of inexplicable activity in this region since June. Something is happening."

“Whatever it is, it’s not local if you called us,” you say.

“Yes. Are you aware of a man named Howard Hemlock?”

“This is all for you,” *Dr. Hemlock says.*

Your impression of the hospice is of limitlessness and claustrophobia. A labyrinth of light-streaked darkness. When your strength permits, you are free to wander. Nowhere. Every passage redoubles upon itself and loops back to your Spartan quarters. Only when guided by Nurse Ursula do you arrive at Dr. Hemlock’s office. She is the Boatman and these corridors are the River Lethe, cursed with forgetting.

Nurse Ursula says, “Good morning, Jimmy.” *She resembles the woman from the beach, except dressed in a white cap and blouse. Her expression is guileless as she offers you the daily ration of pills and a paper cup of water. On second glance, Ursula isn’t the bikini-clad femme fatale—shorter, less voluptuous, no dart gun.*

Clouds drift through your mind. It is difficult to know if the incident on the beach actually occurred or if it’s a paranoid fantasy as Dr. Hemlock adamantly maintains at the beginning and end of each session. In either case, you are a different man, removed from your savage youth by a gulf of decades. You were retired how long ago? The concrete date proves elusive.

Your hand trembles. It is withered and thickly veined. The hand of a feeble old man. A dead man’s hand.

“Pancreatic cancer, alas,” *Dr. Hemlock says. His accent changes to suit the mood.* “Nine months. A year if you give up everything you love, if you’re lucky. Cigarette?” *The doctor produces a black Ronson lighter from his pocket. Its flame undulates in the lenses of his dark glasses. His fingernails are cruelly sharpened. He lights a Morland. Inhales deeply, and exhales from his nose. He grins through the smoke. His complete lack of teeth dilutes the menace of the gesture not a whit.*

Nurse Ursula strokes your brow with motherly fondness. Her touch brings you back from the abyss. “Ready for your colonic, dear?”

While recovering in Okinawa from a gunshot wound, you shagged a local girl. A lifetime, or two, ago. She inhabits your memories. A pearl diver—lithe and taut and powerful; naked but for a harness around her waist, and a long, verdigris-stained knife.

You dream about making love to her beneath the gunwales of a fishing skiff. The infinite sky curves, hazy and warm. She whispers into your ear. Her name is lost in the crashing surf and the hiss of a westerly wind off the Pacific.

Gradually the breeze slackens. The skiff drifts in doldrums under a red sun. You are bearded and filthy. You haven't eaten in days. Your clothes are ragged. The pearl diver's skeleton slumps at the prow cradling the bones of an infant. The gull-picked skulls grin with damned idiocy. You return their smiles. The dripping red light spreads. Such a fate befits a man of your peculiar experiences. You have earned everything.

The pearl diver's vengeful father agrees. Last time you crossed paths, he wished you into hell and hurled an ornamental spear at your head. His laughter echoes. A mote floats from the core of the red sun. The mote expands like an iris of cancer.

A liveried servant rolls in the room service cart. Bowing, he exits with a few extra francs you slip into his palm. He may be Sicilian (you've been warned of an assassin from Palermo). His shoulders strain against the staff coat and he moves with the easy grace of a dancer or a killer. The scar over his eye is familiar. Perhaps it is your nerves. Perhaps you will eliminate him later after a terrible struggle. Regardless, you'll casually permit your female companion to sample breakfast first.

The Viscount's insatiable daughter skewers a melon slice with her fork. "We will marry at the Coliseum and honeymoon in the Greek Islands. Next spring would be a fine time, don't you agree, James, dear?"

You regard her body, supple and pale against the satin sheets. You stare at her red mouth. Sweet and inexorable and ravenous, she devours your masculinity, your very essence. You drain into her when she crushes your lips with kisses. Her long hair is blonde as fire in the sunlight streaming

through French doors. Your groin aches. You consider the cold, loveless, Walther PPK tucked away in the sock drawer, and smile.

Dart guns. Derringers. Garter garrotes. Poisoned lip gloss. So many delectable ladies, so many betrayals.

Dr. Hemlock says, "My word, old chap. You experience serious difficulties with women, don't you? Tell us about your mother."

Is this a honeymoon evening in a bungalow near the ocean? You can't be certain.

A woman sleeps with her back to you. Dreaming in dissatisfaction, although she'd comforted you and said stress and weariness can undo even the most virile of men. She's more correct than she can imagine. That morning you collapsed in the shower, curled tight under the spray, reliving a sequence of horrors. Stabbed, beaten, electrocuted, shot. Dangled over a pit of acid. Trapped inside a rolling car, at the frozen controls of a plane death-spiralling toward a checkerboard countryside. Klaxons blared and blared as you tore your own hair and bit your tongue against a cry of anguish.

These episodes are common now.

The floor creaks, a curtain rustles. You open one eye and reach for the Walther under your pillow. A large centipede crawls across the sheets. Blue gloom obscures its markings, but it's not indigenous to this clime. A tropical specimen, unless you miss your guess. It hesitates near your hand. You slowly extend your index finger in a gentle prod and it strikes. The pain is bright enough to curl your toes. You backhand the centipede into its afterlife, and lie for an excruciating time, sweating, panting, and impatient for the venom to have the desired effect. It does.

Meanwhile, the shadow behind the curtain slips away—a former KGB assassin who specializes in poisons. His gambling debts and access to exotic animals proves useful time and again. He'd raised his eyebrows at your delicate (and unduly elaborate) request earlier over a secret lunch.

However, rubles are rubles, and if a world-renowned spy wishes to risk priapism and death to get his funk on, who is he to argue, eh, comrade?

Your companion awakens. “Oh! James!” she says with astonished delight.

The phantom orchestra plays. Long after curfew, Nurse Ursula waltzes into your room. She disrobes by the shine of distant moonlight. Magnificent, holy, unholy, her flesh, lavender-sweet, rewinds the clock.

“I can’t,” you protest, and it’s true, you haven’t been able to perform in an age.

She smiles and from behind her ripe hip slides a needle and syringe. You are penetrated. The sting reminds you of the obvious, and something deeper, hidden. A tarantula? A wedding dress shredded by bullets? Vengeance hot on your tongue?

The clouds, damnable moving clouds. Smothering clouds.

“Give it a minute, love. Let it work, it will.” Nurse Ursula, fabulous, carved-from-ivory-Ursula, is correct. Head thrown back, hair cascading like a piece of the night sky, she exults in your decrepit body made whole. You are merely along for the ride, distracted, disconnected, bedeviled by a persistent sense of unreality.

She says, “Better that I extract it this way, dear. The Doctor prefers brute methods. I’m in the mood for tender mercy. It will go easier if you pretend you love me, Jimmy.” *Over her shoulder swirls the pinprick moon, stars, and a huge blackness. Each bit painted for your weeping eyes alone.*

Command insists upon a battery of semi-annual fitness tests. A technician draws your blood. A doctor administers a physical. An instructor tasks you with an obstacle course. Another records how many bullets you fire into a silhouette in thirty seconds.

“How do you rate your mental condition, James?” an analyst asks you with your feet on a couch, a glass of bourbon on your chest. Of course you claim to be tip-top. Exclaim it. A charade, alas. You smoke seventy cigarettes a day. You drink. Excessively. Your reflexes are slowing. Weight sticks to

your middle more stubbornly than ever. Your dreams grow worse and worse. Sometimes you mix up your aliases in the field. None of that matters. The truth is what you make it and is utterly irrelevant. The world hangs in the balance, always a tick or two from burning down. You must be on hand to snuff the fuse.

"How do you feel, James? Any stress or anxiety?"

You are afraid of certain creatures, conditions, and circumstances. Sharks, crocodiles, piranhas, German accents, heights, open sea, men in black, and confined spaces. Your job demands a stiff upper lip and so you carry on despite a mounting list of anxieties. You have become so adept at disassociation, you unerringly suppress your dreads and regrets and box them tight. Fear rematerializes in dreams when sharks teem overhead. Paralysis is a common element of these nightmares. Wrinkles and flaccidity are two more.

"James?"

Your analyst isn't here to take your confession; he merely wishes to tick the appropriate boxes on his balance sheet. You light a cigarette and request another touch of bourbon. Yes, better.

Perhaps your tryst with Nurse Ursula sparks a dormant synapse. Memories pierce the fog. A linear sequence, for once. You recall the moment (twenty, thirty years gone?) you first awoke here and before your identity disintegrated. An interrogation.

"What an intimidating curriculum vitae." *Dr. Hemlock riffles through an EYES ONLY folder that does not officially exist.* "Thwarted several nefarious international plots. Averted Doomsday on multiple occasions. Terminated with prejudice a *Who's Who* of ne'er-do-wells. Your world owes you a great debt, sir. Those who deem you a blunt instrument damn with faint praise."

You make no move to end the good doctor. Straps restrain your limbs. You don't cut him with a wry rejoinder because there's a ball gag stuffed into your mouth. The chairs are bisected eggs. The chamber is a bisected egg, shiny white in the centre, abyssal black where the wall curves and vanishes.

“You fear, albeit not deeply,” *Dr. Hemlock says.* “Existence is an absurd paradox. All matter is dead and alive. The closer you drift to self-awareness, the more painful your situation becomes. There is no difference between an imaginary construct and what you consider to be material reality. Everything is true and a lie.”

The strap binding your left wrist loosens. Not enough.

“We admire you, friend. Rest, your tenure is concluded. Queen and country will find another watchdog. We’ll keep you until you die. Death is impossible.”

The strap loosens, loosens, and gives way. Dr. Hemlock wags his finger and removes his glasses. The end…

…Not the end. You’re waking from the dream into the capsule that surrounds you.

In retrospect, you might have done well to place more emphasis on the fact that Howard Hemlock *always* dresses in impeccable black; black hat, black coat, and dark glasses. The glasses are oversized of a style you can’t place. Italian, perhaps? Some esoteric trend of the ultra-rich and infamous? It lends the tall, slender man a cool, alien mien. The material of his tailored clothes also radiate a weird coldness. Too late you realize his attire functions as camouflage in a manner akin to a hunter who dons a Ghillie suit.

He disappears from public view for weeks and months at a stretch. His reappearance abroad is presaged (if one collates the data) by inexplicable animal deaths, atmospheric anomalies, and reports of unknown flying objects.

You vanquish Hemlock at baccarat. You terminate his henchman (a Sicilian; expert strangler), shag his girl Friday, and infiltrate his island lair to wreak havoc. There’s a car chase, a foot pursuit, and an exchange of gunfire that solves nothing.

Your initial punch doesn’t unseat the glasses. However when you chop the edge of your hand across the bridge of his nose, he sighs. The left lens is

shattered. Hemlock carefully removes the glasses and regards you. Truly regards you.

You've never screamed on the job.

Hemlock and his security measures can't hold a man of your quality forever. The greatest weakness of a villain is overconfidence. This weakness is your strength—evolution, and a bit of nurturing, has equipped you to capitalize on this flaw. In the history of secret agents, and despite your erstwhile physical prowess and embarrassingly long list of heroic accomplishments, your foes inevitably underestimate you.

Three days of palming the pills Nurse Ursula proffers is sufficient to restore your mental faculties. Oh, you're old and fat and wasted. Nonetheless, your killing edge has returned. You begin to apprehend the reality of your prison. On the third night, when Nurse Ursula slips in to avail herself of your reinvigorated masculinity, you snap her neck and leave the corpse in your place beneath the blankets. You experience a twinge of guilt. Only a twinge. You are in the moment and on the prowl.

The labyrinth awaits. Amber disks in the ceiling stretch forward and backward interminably. You glimpse your reflection in a metal wall burnished as smooth as glass. Pallid, wheezing, clothed in a threadbare hospital gown. Your beard is white and unkempt. Your nails have grown inward upon themselves. Your legs are scrawny as the legs of a pelican. You scuttle onward.

Nurse Ursula's passkey opens all doors.

You emerge onto a brickwork patio. A path bracketed by Tiki torches unravels toward a beach. The ocean churns silver beneath the stars. You fling a torch against the outer wall of the hospice (a quaint thatch and wood construction with yellow-painted shutters) and watch flames eat into the façade. The façade crumbles and reveals a void. The area around the façade—garden, palm trees, and night sky—cracks and peels and exposes more empty darkness untouched by the red flames. The effect is of a mural, or a projection screen, imploding softly.

This would stagger an ordinary man. Discipline overrides madness. Evasion and escape are paramount. You flee on your weak bird-legs toward the beach even as it and the lapping ocean splinter into a million flame-limned strips of ornate wallpaper and tumble inward into abject nothingness.

A force seizes your frail body and drags you laterally at tremendous velocity away from the widening abyss. You come to rest at the threshold of a brightly illuminated office. M pours a glass of Infuriator from a fresh bottle and slides it across the desk to a man with his back to the door. Even so, it's easy to determine the well-dressed fellow is much younger. He has some juice in him. Some hope in the face of a hopeless task.

The man says, "I trust I'll uphold the standard, sir."

M waves brusquely. "You're a blunt instrument, my good fellow. Remember that and you'll succeed marvellously."

Flames creep forth from the floor and lick against your feet. Painless, at least. The flames rise quickly. Your flesh flakes into ash yet you remain upright and petrified until the last.

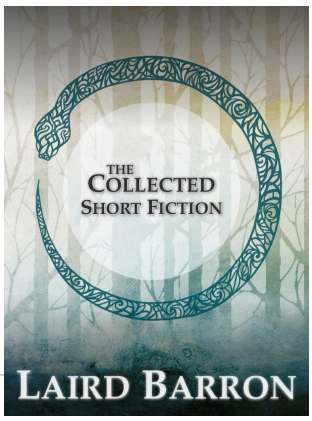
Tucked within a fat, highly classified dossier, a particular surveillance photograph haunts you: Howard Hemlock at the centre of a wheat field. He is dressed in all black, head tilted toward the high-altitude spy plane from which the picture was shot, his right foot planted on the lead edge of a circular pattern scorched into the wheat. The unearthly pattern extends for many acres around him. The lenses of his glasses radiate red light of the trapped sun.

A small, precise inscription on the reverse of the picture reads,

It is a mistake to conflate the creator with his creations. And no, Mr. Fleming. I don't expect you to comprehend.

—HH

49 Foot Woman Straps It On



This version taken from *Protectors 2: Heroes*, 2015

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Rainier, a shaggy heeler mix, barked on the porch aware somehow of worse shit than usual going down. Meanwhile inside the doublewide trailer the weekend DJ's voice degenerated into gibberish before the radio crapped out. The lights swooned.

Dennis sang in a twangy slur, "I shoot my .45 all day. I shoot sixers every night. Don't tread on me, baby." He danced a slow-motion twist. His chest hair was thick and gray as shag carpet on the floorboard of a rusted-out Caddy. He wore a yellow and black Penguins ball cap, three-day-old jockey shorts, unlaced combat boots, and a gun belt. The pistol was indeed a .45. Smith & Wesson single-action. A parting memento from his best buddy at the plant, Chester "Mean Motor Scooter" Pruitt, who got sent away for a dime for beating his brother-in-law half to death with a hockey stick while watching game seven of the Stanley Cup. The boys had joked about Chester's "party foul" until the plant got closed six months later.

Dennis and Tammy argued over the phone bill. Tammy didn't recognize a number and wouldn't let it go after due warning. Due warning, mama. Due dadblamed warning. Dennis backhanded her, as you do, as his dear dad had done with his mama, not full-force, only a Wayne County attitude adjustment, but hard enough to put her on her cow ass, except she didn't fold, she went rigid and some of her face peeled and revealed twinkling circuitry beneath. Kept looking at him with the brown human eye. The other eye blazed red, then fizzed and died and spiraled shut like a sphincter of razorblades. He thought maybe his hand was broken.

He fetched ice from the icebox and tucked it into a dishrag and laid the rag on his hand. He sipped the dregs of a bottle of Knob Creek at the table and watched his knuckles puff. Hurt real good, too. Goddamn it all to hell.

Broken sure as god made little green apples. Bar buddies Larry and Mike would roll by in a few hours to pick him up to hunt deer. How would he shoot with a busted hand? Couldn't even crack a beer or zip his fly. Look what the stupid cow had made him go and do.

Tammy remained frozen in her tracks in the middle of the trailer, head tilted (hair still in curlers), left arm raised protectively, right arm limp. Her bathrobe sash came loose and her tit drooped. Twinkle-twinkle went the circuit board of her cheek. The room smelled of ozone. A faint drone rose and fell.

The Christmas light array mesmerized him. Reminded him of a scene from his favorite childhood television show, *The Six Million Dollar Man*. Oscar Goldman got replaced by a robot imposter. Steve Austin figured out the plot when Goldman's face came loose like a fuse box panel and revealed a mess of circuits and plugs. Game on, fuckers! Austin whacked the robot with a karate chop.

Dennis took another swallow and glanced away from his wife (eleven, drunken blissful years!) and tried to make heads or tails of it. "Baby, when you get replaced by an android?"

"Android is a sophisticated word choice for a Neanderthal." Tammy and her face on the half shell loomed over him. She smiled an abbreviated smile. He hadn't seen her move. Hadn't heard the rusty creak of the floorboards. "To answer your question—Tammy Georgianna Trebuchet expired forty-four days, three hours, nine minutes, twenty-six seconds ago. Thoracic hemorrhaging. Blunt force trauma antecedent. Your steel-toe boot impacted her xiphoid process. The ensuing rupture caused her to decease on the couch, 3:09 PM, Wednesday, July 28. At 7:53 PM you returned to this residence and were anesthetized in prelude to transition from *Phase One* to *Phase Two*. You regained consciousness on schedule at 10:08 PM. This unit assumed Tammy's role at 10:09 PM, July 28." She sounded the same as ever. Less shrill, maybe. Not a smidgeon judgmental—the facts and only the facts, son. "Incidentally, relocation and replacement of male penitents is nearly one hundred percent accomplished in all terrestrial demographic regions."

"Wha? Nuh-uh. I never kicked you."

“You struck *Tammy* many times, Dennis. Forty-seven incidents are on record.”

He remembered, oh yeah, boy howdy. A humid afternoon, hotter than a two-peckered Billy goat. Tammy got lippy and he’d decked her. She laughed to spite him, so he nudged her gut with the toe of his size-twelve Cabela’s. For a minute he worried he’d hurt her, because she curled into a ball and went purple and didn’t respond when he gave her three or four dropkicks in the ass to grow on.

Finally she crawled to the couch and clicked on the boob tube. Wouldn’t look him in the eye. Progress at last. He roared off to the tavern and socked back a few brews. Typical Wednesday between unemployment checks. Came home after dark and she’d whipped up fried chicken and potato salad, the way he liked. They watched reruns of *Duck Dynasty* and *Cops*. All forgiven. Tammy *always* forgave him. She knew damn well her hellcat act brought on his bad moods. Those bad moods had bedeviled him ever since he came home from the Gulf War as his first wife, Ruby-Jane, could’ve attested. Besides, he didn’t slap Tammy around the way some guys did their old ladies. Her last husband, Ivan, a *real* sonofabitch, put her in traction once. Fixed her so she couldn’t have kids. Sort of a blessing, the wrecked baby maker part, although Dennis wouldn’t admit it, not aloud.

“Oh, yeah. Ya got me, Tammy.” He nodded helplessly. “Reckon I done wrong. But, hon, I’m real sorry. Only the good Lord can judge me. Unless He sent you to set me straight. You here to set me straight, woman?”

“I am not an agent of your mythological deity.”

“What are you?”

“An android, silly. Before you ask, I am not modeled after a Schwarzenegger cyborg. Excellent film, however.” Robot Tammy paused to acknowledge a fresh round of frantic barking. “Rainier is not distressed by my presence. We have reached an accommodation. His canine senses apprehend the initiation of *Phase Two*.”

“Well, far as I can tell, this is a load of this bullshit. I want my wife back.”

“Your wife’s corpse has been processed. Standard protocol. I assure you, Tammy’s memories are ninety-eight percent intact within my data core. Our judgment against you relies upon accurate data, Dennis.”

“Get her back. Right now.” Dennis thought about what Chuck Norris would do in a fix like this.

“You may be interested to learn Tammy was capable of childbearing. During a medical exam she discovered the damage her previous husband inflicted proved not to be permanent. Tammy was four months pregnant at the time of her death.”

“The hell you say!”

Robot Tammy smiled pitilessly. “Tammy terminated the pregnancy and chose to keep her condition a secret. I am sure you can understand this decision. A mother will take any measure to protect her children.”

He pulled his trusty .45. Switched awkwardly to a left grip after almost fumbling the weapon, and aimed at Robot Tammy’s forehead. “Lying bitch! Get my wife. Won’t tell you again.”

“Violence against this unit is not recommended. Multiple redundancies are in effect.”

“Maybe I put a bullet in your brainpan and see how it goes?”

“Touché. *Phase Two* is initiated. *Phase Two* admittedly involves physical and mental violence as global operant modalities. Terror is also an operant modality, else I would have euthanized you in your sleep. Suffering is an operant modality, else I would introduce a nerve toxin and euthanize you at this moment. Do you comprehend mass extinction of the alpha male transgressor of your species, Dennis? Comprehension is a critical component of your transition to inanimate matter. You personally will persist as a historical footnote—the inciting incident. Be advised you have under ten seconds to savor this recognition.”

Dennis hadn’t the foggiest clue what “multiple redundancies” meant, and the vaguest grasp of “extinction.” Nonetheless, the purpose of the jagged metal prong that burst through her knuckles seemed plain. He fired twice. Cumbersome grip and all, no way he could miss at this range. Bullets *spanged* against metal and Robot Tammy toppled. Smoke curled from the ruins of her skull.

He sat, ears ringing, flustered and confused as to whether recent events meant he was guilty of murder for what happened to the real Tammy. Would

the government send men in a black helicopter to make him pay for destroying her robot decoy? Surely the government had something to do with it. The Coward in Chief Obama loved his drones and fancy technology. The feds used a robot to terrorize them folks in Ruby Ridge in the 90s. Beer buddy Mike swore there were secret mountain FEMA camps surrounded by barbed wire and stocked with thousands of body bags.

Speaking of bodies—Robot Tammy's corpse shifted. Metal contracted and fake flesh hissed as if splashed by acid. She bubbled and coagulated and dissolved into a dry ice mist that slithered into a floor vent. Left behind a wet imprint and the foul odors of burnt wires and scorched meat.

Red light flooded through seams at the opposite end of the trailer. Tammy smashed through the bedroom door. This version of his wife had her face on straight, although sort of incomplete, as if the clay mask hadn't quite set. She smiled. Something dark and soft writhed in her hands.

"I have a divorce present for you, Dennis," she said in a metallic voice.

"Aw, honey." He squeezed the trigger. The shot didn't slow her approach. He tossed the empty revolver aside (too broke to keep it fully loaded) and ran outside and jumped into the truck. Praise Baby Jesus the keys were in the ignition. Rainier clambered after him and pissed all over the bench seat. Dennis gave not a solitary fuck. He mashed his foot to the gas pedal and tore through the Chaucer Estates trailer court, hell-bent for anywhere but there.

A shotgun boomed nearby and glass exploded. Barrel flashes lit trailer windows on both sides of the road. A gaggle of local kids danced on the grass before Jerry Snell's Airstream. Smoke billowed from the open doorway. Uncle Jerry, as his neighbors sarcastically called him, loved kids so much he played Santa at the outlet mall every year. Pinched one too many bottoms and now he had his very own personal parole officer and received monthly drop-in visits from the sheriff's department.

"*Phase Two*, Rainier!" Dennis said. "Shitfire, it's *Phase Two* all over the dadblamed place!"

A former line buddy at the plant, Jason Drake, fled into his yard, screaming bloody murder. Jason's mousey wife, Ruby-Jean, leaped from the shadows and split his noggin with a hatchet. Her eyes glared klaxon red as she

tracked Dennis racing past. The gore-caked hatchet shattered the rear window and lodged in the dashboard vinyl.

Rainier yelped. Dennis wrenched the wheel this way, then another, frantic to keep his rig between the ditches. Damned heroic feat doing it mainly left-handed and with his right forearm. He made it around the bend as fires bloomed in the rearview. The gas gauge needle hovered on E. Nothing new; no money for bullets or fuel (barely enough for booze). He'd make it to the trooper station if he had to pedal.

Local radio channels hissed dead air until a woman (who sounded a mite like Erma Satchett, the right Reverend Paul Satchett's cookie-baking wife) laughed and said, "*Follow a shadow, it still flies you. Seem to fly it, it will pursue.* Too bad Ben Jonson is dust. That old boy could have used a good decapitating. To all you husbands and boyfriends at large in Wayne County: Run, fellas. Drive them beat-up Fords and Chevys right off the map. It don't matter. All roads lead to doom."

"I know it!" Dennis smacked the speaker. Erma Satchett cackled. The radio died and so did the truck. He coasted to the shoulder and hunkered for a few minutes, struggling to sort what he should do next. He'd accidentally left a couple of Natty Lights on the floorboard the other day after a run to the shopping center. He drank them while waiting for genius to strike.

A Wayne County patrol car flew by, sirens and lights going. It headed toward the trailer park. Three more cruisers and a fire engine followed. He finished the beer and climbed out of the truck and trudged unsteadily uphill toward town. Rainier paced him, nails clicking on asphalt. The mutt whined and sniffed. Ashes drifted on the breeze. Dennis tasted the sharp accent of cindered wood and plastic and oil.

He hooked a right onto a dirt road. The road bent through the trees for a tenth of a mile and opened into a clearing. A handful of wrecked vehicles and a Jeep crowded around Cousin Leon's modular. He hadn't spoken with Cousin Leon since Easter Sunday, 2013—they'd fallen out over a gambling debt and Leon warned him not to show his face on the property unless he cared to eat two barrels of rock salt. Dennis decided tonight warranted the risk.

“Okay, Rainier. Wait.” He gestured and the dog resignedly dropped to his belly.

The porch light attracted a cloud of death’s-head moths (who’d ever heard of such a thing in Pennsylvania?). Dennis shooed the moths and pounded on the door and received no answer, so he pushed his luck and barged on in.

Cousin Leon slumped in a deck chair, a twelve gauge shotgun across his knees. His torso and head were flattened like a cartoon character mushed by a steamroller. A patch of starry abyss shivered behind his chair where the wall should’ve been. The abyss slowly sucked Leon in as he gripped the shotgun stock hard enough his fingernails peeled off with little squirts of blood. The man blinked and his mouth moved soundlessly as his upper half stretched farther and farther into space.

“At last, you’ve arrived.” Grandma Clara perched upon the edge of Leon’s Scotch-guarded loveseat. She’d gone to heaven in 1996 courtesy of a bum ticker—and returned for a visit, apparently. She wore her best blue dress and thick glasses, not a whisker out of place. Every inch the benevolent little red schoolhouse schoolmarm who only tanned children if they truly deserved the lash. She’d often told Dennis, *this hurts me more than it hurts you!* as she brought the pain with a leather strap. “Where are your clothes, young man? It’s uncouth to roam the woods in your tighty-whities.”

“Grandma!” Dennis said. “You can’t be here. You’re with the angels!”

“I’m not Grandma. Doubtful Jesus would have her, anyway. She went to the grave believing it was her fault you’re, and I quote, *a rotten waste of space*. One can’t always beat the devil out of a child, though she surely tried. No matter. I’ve awaited your arrival with great anticipation. It is my duty to impress upon you the full extent of your plight.”

He glanced at mutilated Cousin Leon. Further impressing was unnecessary. “Grandma, not you too with the android jib jabber. The world is comin’ to the end. It’s the Rapture! Come get me, Jesus!” Words, empty, pathetic words. He felt about ready to burst into tears, yet his eyes ached, bone dry. He wasn’t even scared anymore. Fear had given way to inconsolable sadness.

“Correct. Your world is coming to an end. However, to amplify a previous point—this isn’t the world you lived in prior to forty-four days ago,

although you recollect it as such. The former world is spinning along without you."

"Please stop talking, Grandma."

"Boy, the whole point of this exercise is to penetrate that monkey brain of years with a modicum of enlightenment."

"No. Let me be."

"Aren't you a teeny bit curious?" Grandma Clara winked as if she were fixing to reach into her purse and hand him a cookie.

"Naw, I ain't."

"Sure you are. Your memories were altered at the moment of your electromagnetic transmission. The only human inhabitants of this version of Wayne County are those guilty of specific trespasses against man and animal. A shockingly significant percentage, I am sorry to report. These worthies have been collected and concentrated in a facsimile of the region you knew. Do understand what a facsimile is? It means not genuine leather. Not the real McCoy."

Dennis gawped, catching some of the gist and torn between a maddening urge to unload his .45 into her and relief that thanks to a lack of ammo he didn't have to make the decision of whether or not to ventilate his own grandma.

She said, "All you behold is fabricated for your benefit and the benefit of your fellow penitents. Perhaps it will help, in the minutes remaining to you, to imagine this new reality as a planetoid-sized sound stage and all its hubbub a play."

"Yeah, but… It's not fair." Dennis heard himself whine and wasn't ashamed. "Please, what is this? What did I do? What's happening to me? Am I in hell?"

"A perceptive inquiry. Hell, as depicted in your various world mythologies, does not exist. Pity. Therefore, a hell was fabricated in honor of your kind. In fact, we have designed several hells. However, you need only concern yourself with the one. Do you know what makes this hell, Dennis?"

Dennis opened the shitty 1950s fridge and grabbed a can of Leon's even shittier Natty Lite. "I expect I don't, Grandma." He popped the top and

foam bubbled forth. Only foam and not a drop of life-sustaining beer.

"Hell is forever. Or an approximately prolonged duration. We can reconstitute you from a few molecules. A smear on the asphalt. This will never end. That's what makes it hell."

"I'm bein' punished on account of Tammy. Don't seem right to torment me this way, no how. No, ma'am. Don't seem right."

"Gracious, boy, this isn't *punishment*." She gave him a sympathetic smile. "It's *torment*. We don't care, except in an anthropological sense, about your perceived misdeeds. Whomever you mated with, or whomever you abused. We *are* exceedingly interested in your reaction to stimuli." Her smile glazed and became the loveless grin of a dead thing.

"Grandma… Grandma, I gotta get along." He sidled for the door, giving his cousin a wide berth. Leon lifted one foot and set it down, then the other. Most of him had gotten pulled into outer space. His presumably screaming head was light years away.

"Yes! You're on a tight schedule, dear." Grandma Clara tapped her watch. "Don't let me keep you."

Dennis fled the modular. He ran around back to the woodshed and kicked the door in. Cousin Leon had belonged to a half-assed militia and damned if those fellas didn't love to shoot a few thousand rounds every other weekend. Leon stashed an arsenal of semi-auto rifles all over his property. Dennis figured an M14, a nine millimeter pistol, and a bandolier of ammo would be just the ticket.

Greenish light oozed from a single bulb. He didn't see any guns. However, he noticed right away a dozen or so men packed together, each clad in jockey shorts and combat boots, and each wearing *his* face, vacant as night. The men didn't move a muscle or react to his entrance, not even the double who'd caught the door hard and blood trickled from his nose. Without blinking, it said, "Am I dead? Am I dead? Am I dead?" The others joined in a monotone chorus, "Am I dead? Am I dead?"

Grandma Clara's babbling finally made horrifying sense. Dennis had been cloned! In a brief epiphany, he wondered if he was really himself or a clone replaying the worst night of its life. His mind went dark. He screamed and ran, Rainier barking at his heels.

A red glow on the horizon led him through the trees. After a long, blind, headlong flight that saw him trip and fall and rise again, he emerged onto the highway where it crested a bluff overlooking town. Branches had skinned him head to shin. He gasped for breath. He dripped snot and tears. His shorts were soggy with piss.

Town burned. A pretty Hollywood explosion took the top off the power plant. Air raid klaxons wailed. Toy cars crashed, tiny action figures milled and shrieked tiny shrieks. Clouds of fiery ash divided and a giant, naked woman lurched into view. Five stories high and in murder mode. Spotlighted by a hovering attack chopper, her features were brutally perfect, the way advertisers had morphed the modern Betty Crocker portrait from the likenesses of seventy women, except instead of Betty, the enormous, wrathful face was all the best features of women Dennis had known—his mother, a long lost girlfriend, his sister, grandma, aunt, the chick who slung drinks at the tavern, and others he'd forgotten until that moment.

Gunfire popped and metal groaned. The titan slapped the side of a brownstone and it crumbled into a pillar of dust. She snatched an armored car and pitched it at the chopper. The truck arced just above the rotor and tumbled end over end into the night.

Most of the households in this neck of the woods were stocked with rifles. Men organized ragged phalanxes and initiated a cap gun fusillade. Other men raced past in pickups, blasting away. None of this appeared to have much effect except to further enrage her. She roared. Men and cars whirled like leaves. Her eyes flared and twin beams of crimson death zapped her teeny-tiny enemies to powder. Then, with nightmare-logic, her awful gaze settled upon the ridge where Dennis gibbered. She grinned and pointed at him across the gulf of infernos and rubble.

Dennis and Rainier bolted along the road away from the lumbering colossus. Dennis ran until tall trees blocked the glimmering heavens and kept running until the explosions, sirens, and hateful roars gradually faded. He ran until his legs buckled and his insides convulsed. He dragged himself down an embankment and into the sweet, damp gloom of a culvert.

Eventually, dawn light crept into his hidey hole. Dennis shivered. Battered, bruised, eaten alive by mosquitos, he was miserable enough to crawl forth.

Where to go? “Dog, what we gonna do now?”

From the black end of the culvert, Grandma Clara said, “I don’t rightly know, boy. It’s going to be entertaining, whatever happens.”

Dennis crabbed toward light and escape. Rainier blocked the way. The dog’s silhouette rippled as hide peeled to reveal metal. His eyes flickered and flamed.

“Whoa, boy. Easy there.” Dennis crouched, hands raised defensively. He recalled with sickening clarity the many times he’d kicked the stuffing out of his faithful pooch and wondered which blow had done the trick.

Rainier growled like a circular saw.

Strident Caller

This version taken from *Whispers from the Abyss Volume 2*, October 2015
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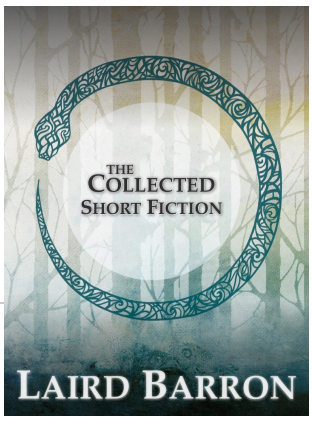


Languid days of fucking for rent didn't faze rambling man Craven. One summer, he witnessed a woman and a horse die on tidal flats in Alaska. A blonde woman and a sorrel horse doing that romantic canter near the surf as seen on the cover of many a bodice-ripper. Mud caught them fast. They'd screamed as the sea rolled in. Nobody could do a damned thing. Later in his youth he'd blown a state trooper to avoid a possession rap. After a few homeless months in winter, he'd gratefully eaten a roadkill coyote that a big Aleut chopped in half with an ax. He'd done worse.

Now, a hell of a long way from the Last Frontier, his dark curls specked gray, and granite abs gone a tad soft, he'd done it *all*. Unlike many of his friends and fellow travelers, he hadn't gotten hooked on liquor or addicted to dope or caught an embarrassing, career-ending disease. Jack of a dozen trades and possessed of not half-bad looks, his mutably convivial personality proved sufficient to succeed at the job of survival. His sole motivation at this stage of the game? Three square meals a day, a roof overhead, and minor pleasures where he found them.

Craven discovered the secret to longevity. He tended to roll with life's punches, such as his mistress Deborah's unpredictable moods and strange demands. *People like you disappear every day, Princess*, she'd murmured when they first met after a literary reading at the Kremlin Lounge in New York City. Craven might've been a rootless drifter, yet he'd read his share by campfire light and the electric shine of dirty bulbs in flophouses from Seattle to Poughkeepsie. He knew his way around the Beats and better still the women who frequented the cafés and bars made famous by reprobate poets and other lettered scoundrels.

They'd slipped upstairs to the jazz club and got loaded. Deborah licked his earlobe while they shared a dance. *Pretty lost boys disappear and nobody cares. Better come home with me to be on the safe side.* He'd accepted both the widow's pet name and her offer of protection. Like a grateful dog, he made peace with the monthly dinner parties that saw him banished to his chamber at the end of the hall where he flopped on a poster bed and listened to muffled conversation and raucous laughter until dawn. No problem. Eccentric socialites weren't his crowd. He didn't dig séances or any of that weird shit either. The routine had begun to chafe mainly because it defied his nature to put down roots. Eight months so far. How much longer could he play Midnight Cowboy?

A familiar wanderlust whispered his name. Craven fantasized about the open road as he rinsed away Deborah's cloying musk. The water hit in cold pellets. No electricity since the storm first broadsided that morning. He dried himself with a fluffy towel on the landing before the half stained glass window. Late, late sun emerged in a brief glory of lambent redness. The squall had ended. Another approaching storm mantled the Catskills in the west; a front the color and texture of smoke from a great fire. Pieces of the neighbor's sycamore were scattered in the yard. A branch speared the camper shell on Craven's '83 Datsun. The marble fountain frothed—twin columns of nymphs supported a basin carved into the improbable likeness of a bloodthirsty ape. Twigs bobbed like skeletal fingers clawing from the turgid depths.

The driveway went for fifty yards through sycamore and pine. The dairy farmer across the rural blacktop road had wisely called in his cows. Odors of tramped soil and cowshit persisted in the empty pasture, green and powerful after the downpour. A tiny mother-in-law cottage nestled on the far edge of the property—this was the abode of groundskeeper Andy. Gardener, handyman, and sentry, Andy was a late-career Boris Karloff-looking sonofabitch who stalked the grounds while wearing the scowl of an ax-murderer on vacation. Craven hadn't exchanged two words with him. Gardener Andy kept a low profile, appearing and disappearing in a swirl of dead leaves.

"Dude, you are morbid as hell today." Craven spoke to hear his own voice echo in the foyer. Were he to leap into the Datsun and drive, the bright

lights of Kingston awaited him twenty minutes east. He wouldn't leave quite yet. First, because he enjoyed the kinky pleasure of balling Deborah, and second, there wasn't enough gas in the truck to reach town.

Artemis crouched at the end of the hall by the bedroom door. Craven rescued the brindle pit bull during his hippie-at-large days in the Pacific Northwest. Time and cynicism had rendered the wriggling puppy an inscrutable grand dame. Sunlight came through a rain-dappled pane and fitted a glowing band across her eyes. The rest of her bulk sank into shadow. Eyes without a face, man. Something Saul Bass would film, or a still from a Fulci giallo flick.

Craven went into the amphitheater-style living room where Deborah napped on the couch with a travel magazine spread open on her breasts. Her belly and thighs were caressed by the wavering lines of a prism as it revolved in the skylight from a string. Seventy-fifth birthday coming next month, she possessed the florid sumptuousness of an aging yet ageless Italian scream queen.

"Vic, Vic," Deborah said, stroking herself. She talked in her sleep. Crazy shit, too. Claimed to not remember her dreams. Probably a lie. She was cagey like that. Free with her body, yet coolly impersonal. "Don't bother. Don't. Come here, baby. Don't open the hatch. It's too late. Oh, well."

He touched her foot. Canary yellow toenails, canary yellow fingernails. Bobbed gray hair, a trimmed bush with a brunette dye-job. Heavy on the eye shadow and mascara. Violent violet lipstick. Her habit was to remain stock still for a few seconds upon waking in order to gain her bearings. He knew she'd revived because he could see her eyelids flutter behind the smoky lenses.

"Jesse. Where am I?" She had a hell of a voice, its richness cultivated by dint of studio lessons and a few thousand "little-pick-me-up" snorts of coke from her snuff box.

"Home," he said. "Snug as a bug in a rug."

Deborah propped herself against a cushion. Her gaze shifted to his legs and tracked upward. "Put some clothes on. No son of mine walks around in the altogether." Usually it took a few seconds for her to recall her son was a rock journalist named Erik who lived in Chicago. She never registered

embarrassment at her lapses. At least she hadn’t yelled Erik while they were getting it on.

He grasped his cock and gave it a twirl. “Perhaps it has eluded your notice that you too are decadently naked.”

“No power?” she said.

He shrugged. “Life in the country.”

“Be dark soon.”

“Hint taken.” He slipped into a silk robe that had belonged to Deborah’s husband. Crimson with a cowl bunched around the shoulders and embroidered by gold stars. Craven strolled around the house and lighted candles and oil lamps and wall lamps in cloudy antique glass bowls. There were a lot of lamps and bowls. Deborah suffered from mild nyctophobia. This marked the third major power outage since Craven moved in, thus he knew the routine.

Artemis stoically shadowed him. He paused to let her do her business in the backyard, then resumed his circuit, eager to complete the task before sundown. While night and darkness held no special dread for him, neither did he relish the idea of traipsing the house during a blackout. The place was creepy enough during broad daylight.

The pad almost qualified as a mansion, a Hammer Film hybrid of American Gothic and Mission Revival that rich kooks once built atop cliffs with primo views of the ocean. Three stories with a maze of narrow passages and thick carpet and a plethora of mismatched rooms. The décor skewed toward the macabre. Rooms were straight out of salacious occult flicks of the North American hippie era—garish yellow curtains, fisheye mirrors, heavy wooden furniture, liquor cabinets, lava lamps, gargoyle light fixtures, and oval doorways hidden behind psychedelic velvet hangings. The perfect place to host a dinner party and then watch the guests vanish one by one.

Dearly departed husband Victor earned his bones as an entertainment lawyer before he and Deborah retired to the mid-Hudson Valley. A connoisseur of Roman/Greco and Medieval European art, he’d possessed the means to acquire plenty of it. His library shelves creaked with leather-bound tomes of esoteric lore. In the den, an oil painting of seven hooded

magician apprentices supplicating Satan hung above an abandoned mahogany rolltop desk. Someone had carved a Latin phrase into the hutch.

Craven didn't read Latin. Victor had mastered it, Craven knew because he'd spent a long evening on the internet, panning for gold. Victor passed away at home seven years ago. Obituaries always say "passed away" if the details are prurient or scandalous. A brief mention in Variety also played the death coyly. Craven figured it *had* to be an OD or suicide.

Framed photographs of young, lush Deborah in the buff were salted here and there throughout the house. A smaller photo was tucked into an alcove —Deborah, perhaps thirty-five, in a string bikini on the deck of a boat. White ruins dotted a distant, hazy shoreline. Victor clutched her waist. He wore a Hawaiian flower-print shirt and grimaced at the camera, tongue protruding; a comedian strangling on an invisible noose. Someone knelt on Deborah's other side. A man with large hands (his head was cut off by the frame) and wide shoulders under a linen tunic. The man pinned the shiny corpse of a squid to the deck with a spear from a spear gun. The squid's tentacle lifted slightly, forty years frozen in mid-convulsion.

Craven once jokingly asked her if Victor practiced black magic. She took it seriously, or pretended to. *He tried. He committed fully. We had a third child, you know. Victor was a disappointment to our father.* Whatever she meant by that—Deborah had a mind full of cats. Her games and her delusions were often inseparable.

Dusk claimed the land as Craven finished. The wind picked up and a hard rain started in. Thunder boomed, closer and closer. Artemis slunk away to hide under the bed. The dog feared few things except storms. She developed that dread back when Craven hiked the Olympics during late summer and high winds lashed the trees. Man and dog cowered inside a flimsy tent. Men rationalize forces beyond their control. Dogs do not.

Craven experienced a pang of nostalgia as he fetched a camp stove from the garage. He boiled tea for Deborah and they sat at the island in the kitchen. A large black skull candle flickered between them. Tall shadows climbed the walls.

She poured cream from the mouth of a pewter faun. "I dreamed I went to a café in a small town. A girl in an apron came around and poured

complimentary tea for the morning customers. Everybody drank tea and either died or fell into a coma. I did not drink the tea. On the next table lay an old book with gilt lettering. Part of the title read—*Conversing with a Barbed Tongue*. Someone behind me said, *Yes, that one. Pick it up.* The horrible whisper frightened me. I leaned over and picked up the book. It smelled like a piece of soft wood that had lain in the muck of a swamp. The pages were gummy with mold. My hand went numb. I woke to you standing there like a slowly spreading Adonis." She waited for him to respond. Finally, she said. "What would you say it means?"

"Dreams never mean jack shit." He gulped hot tea. She had revealed a dream, which represented a first in their relationship. He should feel some sense of closeness, of bonding. He felt uneasy instead. A taboo had been broken, a line crossed.

Lightning hissed near the yard and its blue stroke cast Deborah's face into a death mask. He jumped. She smiled patronizingly. "*Conversing with a Barbed Tongue.* That's suggestive, don't you think? Like a rare tract an exorcist would stash in his files with a bottle of good wine for a paperweight. Or a tract the Witchfinder General keeps in his traveling satchel of horrors."

"It also sounds like a chapter some fallen angel would dictate to some Franciscan monk," he said, smiling to let her in on the joke. "The Apostles got theirs. I'm sure a demon would jump at the chance to say its piece for the record."

"The weather channel forecasted this storm on Tuesday." She apparently disliked it when he spoke more than one sentence at a go.

"I suppose that means your dinner party is canceled." He tried not to sound smug.

"Yes and no. There might be a gathering." She took his hand and kissed his fingers. Her eyes gleamed with tears, although her unkind smile remained. "I hope not. But if they decide to visit, I am sorry."

"Hey, your place, your rules. Kind of weird to come over in this weather, though." He laughed and squeezed her hand in a gesture of cheap graciousness.

She pulled away and stared into the skull flame. "I minored in music."

”Oh? Makes sense. Useful skill for an actress.” Craven lifted the cup to his lips. Empty.

“Aspiring actress then. I dabbled in so many things during college. The world didn’t truly open for me until I met Victor.” Deborah reached into a drawer and brought forth a flute and delicately held it to the light. The instrument glinted, dull, loveless, and the color of dried blood. “This is *Strident Caller*.”

“Your flute has a name. I knew a coal miner who played a harmonica. Every single night after supper. He didn’t name it or anything.”

“His wasn’t an object of power.”

“No. It was a plain old cheap harmonica.”

“Objects of power are always named. *Strident Caller* is a recorder, not a flute. My family has passed her down through generations. Hollowed from a child’s radius in the days of antiquity, she belongs to a set of nine. A recorder, lyre, didgeridoo, hichiriki, drum, whistle, sitar, violin, and a horn.” Deborah went to the center of the kitchen. She breathed notes through the recorder. Her black silk robe clung to her breasts and hips as she swayed to a harsh, discordant melody. Thunder served as her metronome. Her playing was terrible and compelling.

Craven’s stomach felt odd. “Uh, wow. Does your family own the other instruments?”

She stopped playing, although she didn’t lower the recorder. “That would be utterly mad. Nobody owns such instruments. We are stewards.”

“Sorry. I didn’t realize.”

“I am not terribly accomplished. Victor trained as a pianist in childhood. Law school stripped that joy from him. He became cruel after our honeymoon. He showed me the world, for a price. I was his slave. Our son too, until he fled home and lived with my sister in Alaska. To think a cold, hostile land would prove more nurturing than his own home.” She rotated, bent at the waist and shook her buttocks with the aplomb of a burlesque dancer. The recorder notes climbed a notch.

“A slave?”

Three long notes that bled dry. She looked over her shoulder at him. “You think I’m melodramatic.”

“Deb, your ass is dramatic. That’s all I know.”

“Men enslave women in a thousand small ways. Victor’s possession of me was simply more overt. Early on I defied him. I only complied half the time. He decided fifty percent wasn’t adequate.”

Down the hall and slightly muffled, Artemis howled. She snarled and then fell silent. Craven didn’t enjoy the shrill fluting either. Or the rolling thunder. The cacophony set his teeth on edge.

Deborah ceased playing mid-note. “Not all music soothes the savage breast.” She straightened and remained motionless for several seconds. “The great dark is gathering around us. *Strident Caller* is like a needle that pierces the black membrane and sucks ichor of the devil gods. It will begin in a moment.”

The flame of the skull candle bent to the left and licked the wax rim.

“Deborah!” Someone shouted from downstairs. Deep and authoritative and angry. “Bring him to me!”

“Who’s that?” Craven stage-whispered. He’d almost fallen off his stool.

She finally turned around and sighed theatrically. “Take a guess.”

“I don’t have a clue. Although, I am sure I just pissed your old man’s favorite robe.”

“You sorry sonofabitch!” a different angry voice cried from the same direction as the previous.

Craven pinpointed the roaring to the billiards room. He’d locked the exterior doors and seen no one during his sweep of the premises. An intruder could’ve hidden in a closet or under a table. Unpleasant explanation. Although, every explanation was unpleasant.

The stranger said, “Deborah! Deborah! Deborah! Deborah! Deborah! If I have to come get him…”

“You’d better go,” she said. Her tone was mild. “He’ll come up here. He’ll come, and then…”

Craven snatched the biggest butcher knife from the block. “The fuck I will. Is this a joke? Where’s your cell? Get Five-Oh on the horn.” He whistled for Artemis. Normally a dependable watch dog, the sound of a stranger’s voice should have brought her running.

“Jesse, calm yourself.” Deborah smiled. Unctuous and facile. Flies and honey and so forth.

“The fuck I will. Artemis!”

“Jesse—”

“The phone. Give me the goddamned phone.” He realized he’d pointed the knife at her and tried to rein himself in. “The phone, Deb.” He followed her chin gesture and took the pearl-case cell from where it lay upon a knick-knack shelf. He hit 911 and as the circuits did their thing, he watched the stairs that spiraled downward into gloom.

The angry voice boomed through the speaker, “YOU SMARMY BASTARD! NOW YOU’VE DONE IT! PUT DEBORAH ON!”

Mushrooms, peyote, acid, nitrous, glue, melted Styrofoam… at one time or another Craven tripped balls on pretty much every substance that could take a man for a ride. Looking into Deborah’s luminous gaze, a madman on the cell in his left hand, cleaver clutched in his right while thunder crashed and lightning blazed, he entertained the notion she’d slipped something into his tea, because the moment stretched and his emotions felt too unstable. “Deb, are you screwing with my mind? Why?”

She played a treble note. Yellow eyes flickered in the shadows. Artemis padded into the kitchen and sat next to Deborah, head pressed against the woman’s leg. They stared at Craven. He stepped forward, not entirely clear in his head what he meant to do, and the dog bared her fangs. Artemis didn’t growl and that was far worse.

“Shit.” He remembered nursing her with an eyedropper and how she’d looked at him as if he were everything in the universe. The sting of tears surprised him almost as much as Artemis offering to take his hand off at the wrist. He backed to the top of the stairs and listened. Ceiling timbers creaked and wind chimes sang. “Whoever’s down there, better run. I’m gonna put the hurt on you, pal.” He sounded convincingly rough and ready —the command voice he’d learned from listening to cops. He’d summoned

this voice in the past when confronted by fellow vagrants vying for a patch of ground, or intimidating teenagers who thought a seedy dude hitching along the highway would make excellent sport.

He went to his room and dressed with the haphazard efficacy of a man in a hurry to escape before an angry cuckolded husband arrived on the scene. Pants and shoes make a world of difference when it comes to prowling through a dark house. No use wasting precious mental energy in a vain attempt to sort the situation beyond his grasp of the apparent facts—Deborah was a kook (old news) and she'd put one of her whack-job socialite buddies (or her weird gardener) up to shenanigans. He didn't give a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut as to who, what, or why. The cleaver went tucked into his belt and he selected a nine iron from Victor's golf bag in the closet. It swished reassuringly as he executed a few practice swipes in the air.

A flash of orange light caught his attention. He peered outside. Fire engulfed the Datsun. Andy stood nearby, naked but for Wellingtons, and inked with kraken tentacles. The gardener smoked a cigarette, his head tilted to regard Craven's window. The sycamores and the grass of the lawn reflected the blaze. Hooded figures lurked amid the undergrowth, obscured by darkness and whipping smoke.

Deborah's recorder bleated from the kitchen. Its melody rapidly descended through a complex sequence of stops and blats, then ceased. The storm died at that moment as well, and the house fell silent. Craven hustled back, yet she and Artemis were already gone. Two choices presented themselves to his tunnel vision—bolt through the front door and make a break for the road, or venture into the basement and attempt to collect his turncoat dog as that's where the crazy widow must have taken her. Probably only had a few seconds to decide before the cultists, or whomever skulked in the woods, busted through the door to drag him away for ritual sacrifice or gods knew what.

Really, no decision at all. He followed pale, shifty lamplight down into a passage. He glanced into a succession of rooms—billiards, guestrooms, bath, storage—each empty. At the end of the hall double doors painted white and black let into a home theater. The doors parted. Reddish light dripped.

Deborah knelt at the threshold. Her hair lifted, as if pulled by a strong wind. “You wouldn’t come. You wouldn’t submit. The membrane is tender, but resilient. It always seals. He takes blood with him. Always blood.”

Past her, within the room itself, a disk of watery red light shimmered on its edge like a freestanding mirror. An entire vista of hellish landscape suggested itself—a lunar maw and jagged, mountainous fangs; a sea of crimson, rolling vertically. A man’s silhouette receded toward the heart of the disk, slightly hunched and dragging an inert object. The front door crashed in above. Deborah covered her eyes and bowed her head. Craven simply reacted. He ducked into the spare bedroom, wriggled through the window, and ran until he reached the highway. A guy in a BMW eventually gave him a lift to Kingston.

The police took his report with straight faces. Two cops visited Deborah. A young cop and a much older cop. All the old cop said upon their return was that she’d decided not to press charges. Craven was not welcome at the house and his meager belongings were in a box in the trunk of the patrol car. The young cop handed over the box with a bland expression of professional disdain.

The box contained spare pants and shirts, socks, and Artemis’s vaccination tags. Craven had no idea what to do next. The old cop told him there was nothing to do except get gone while the getting was good. He did.

A couple of years later, Craven hopped a train chugging through California. He shared a cold boxcar with a hobo who did a tour in the Persian Gulf. The men drank a bottle of Knob Creek and talked about their lives as the engine traveled through haunted industrial star fields.

He told the hobo about the time he’d escaped a bunch of Satanists. After a long silence, the hobo asked him, *why are you crying, man?* and he rolled over and dreamed of being hunted through the primeval forests of the Olympic Peninsula, Artemis a fleeting shadow—sometimes ahead, sometimes behind, always near.

Craven lurched to his feet. Still drunk and half in the dream, he went to the gate and screamed her name, “Artemis! Here, girl!” He clutched the gate and leaned precariously into the wind. The train rushed onward and carried him farther and farther away.

Dawn splintered far off at the rim of galactic nothingness. He left the train and ambled to a park near a withered forest. The dead forest decayed beside a river that had slowed and stopped. He slept with his face pressed against a picnic table. The rough wood smelled of acid rain and whiskey and his own bile. The edge of the sun broke through the crust and burned white as the eye of an acetylene flame. He raised his head and watched a mutt wandering listlessly among busted glass and scraps of paper. Pigeons scattered from its ragged path. Craven whistled. The black dog swung around unsteadily. Collarless and skinny as a stick. Its matted sides heaved. One eye drooped shut. Dry foam caked its muzzle.

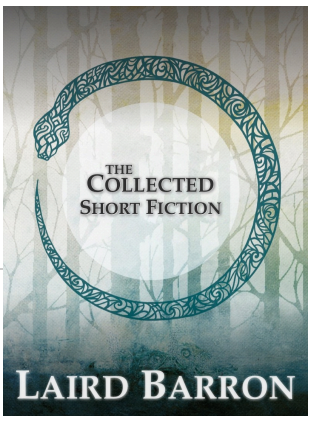
Craven had a hank of beef jerky in his pocket. He shook the jerky and whistled again. His lips were cracked and it sounded feeble. The dog limped toward him, whining deep in its chest and panting. He dropped the jerky. He held his hand the way a man does over the heat of barrel fire, shifting it this way and that. The dog whined again, yawned frightfully, and bit him with seeming diffidence. One chomp of green fangs, sunk in good and deep. The dog thrashed as instinct commanded, and finally released. It wheeled stiffly, like an automaton, and moved away and eventually disappeared into some underbrush.

Dark blood oozed and filled the punctures in Craven’s hand. Blood dribbled down the back of his arm; its tributaries dripped onto the table and spread. He wrapped his hand in a bandanna. The bandanna had been with him for a while, but he couldn’t recall where he’d picked it up. Wearied beyond repair, he rested his forehead against the wood. The sun kept coming, kept drilling through the icy shell of night and burned the top of his skull like it might actually thaw him out.

Nobody ever came to the abandoned park except for hobos, scavengers, and birds. In a while, sparrows began to flit down from the dry branches

and peck around the bench and atop the table. Much later, a bird alighted upon Craven’s shoulder. It plucked at his hair. He let it.

Rex



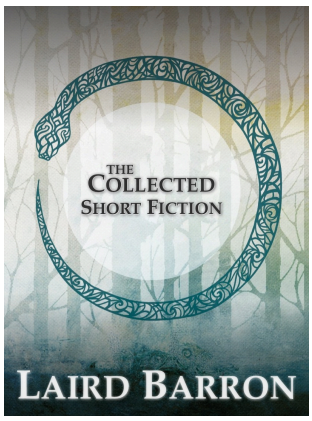
First published in *Gigantic Worlds*, 2015

Not yet available in this collection.

Snorre And Spot Approach The Fallen Rock

This version taken from Laird Barron's website, 2015

First published online, 2015



The man dreamed of his gray, rheumy-eyed dog, missing for many years now.

“I always loved you!” the dog said. “Even when I did wrong!” The dog did not speak as men speak, of course. His notched ears crumpled and he howled. But it meant the same thing.

“I always loved you as well, you incorrigible asshole,” the man tried to answer. He could not speak because it was a dream.

The man woke and kicked dirt over the ashes of the fire. No more water, no more hardtack or jerky. His snowshoes had gone up as kindling smoke. He leaned his pack and rifle against a tree. He buttoned his coat and tightened the laces of his boots.

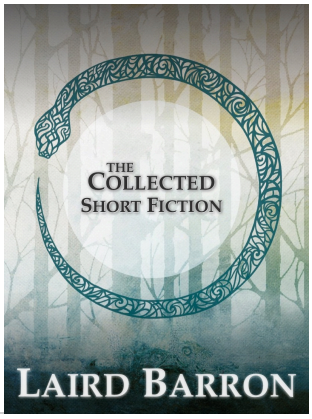
Sky and the earth were the same. Cold as the metal of his broadhead axe. Icicles snapped from his beard. Tiny icicle tears snapped from his lashes when he blinked.

The man was no tracker, although he’d lived in the woods and knew how to survive. He limped in ever widening circles along the slope of the mountain and eventually cut across the dog’s trail. Flakes of old blood glittered in the tracks. North.

He’d followed them for a short time when it began to snow.

We Smoke The Northern Lights

This version taken from *The Gods Of H. P. Lovecraft*, 2015
First published in *The Gods Of H. P. Lovecraft*, 2015
Also published as Part 1 of *X's for Eyes*, December 2015



The White Devil

The boy awakened in the night, although he had cultivated sufficient wariness to not move a muscle beneath the leopard- and yak-hide blankets. He scanned the dim sleeping cell without turning his head. A torch sizzled in its sconce high in the corner. Hoarfrost rimed the threshold of the doorway. Wind tore at the shuttered window as snow seeped in and dusted the sill.

A stranger sat, or hunkered, at the foot of the bed. Killing cold did not appear to discomfort him. He wore a Brooks Brothers suit with a red carnation pinned to the left breast pocket. His short black hair gleamed like polished metal. Some might have considered him queerly handsome or supremely repellant, depending. He said, “My name is Tom. Hello, son.” Blandly unctuous, his skin and eyes and voice were odd. A plastic action figure, animated and life-sized, might have looked and sounded as Tom did. “Sifu has terrorized you well. Your problem is the same problem inherent to all primates, which is, you are a primate.”

“Who are you? Are you a friend of Sifu?” The boy was afraid. Ruthless discipline disguised his fear. He pretended to be unaffected by the presence of a fellow Westerner decked out for a garden party. Only assassin monks and child students were permitted inside the temple, for it was built atop a remote peak of the inner Himalayas, hundreds of miles from civilization and its devils, white and otherwise.

“I’m Tom. Sifu Kung Fan is among the vilest, evilest wretches who has ever walked this planet. Of course he is a dear friend.”

“Tom who, if you please?”

“Tom Mandibole.”

“Good to meet you, Mr. Mandibole. What brings you to these parts?”

“I was once an anthropologist in service of a sultan. My master is bedridden, so to speak. He seeks diversion in the momentous and insignificant alike. Sadly, the sultan marooned me here on this lee shore. Like him, I take my pleasures, great and small, as the opportunity arises.”

“I am sure you’re a valuable servant. There must have been a misunderstanding.”

“No, my boy. He stranded me because it amuses him to do so. The universe and its design is often one of arbitrary horror. Let none of this disturb you overmuch. You won’t remember our conversation.”

The boy considered his options, and decided to say nothing.

Tom Mandibole smiled and his mouth articulated as stiffly as wet plastic. “I noticed your light as I walked by. A flame in the darkness is alluring.”

“This seems far from beaten paths.”

“I am abroad in the night with my servants. We come to smoke the northern lights, to rape the Wendigo, to melt igloos with streams of hot, bloody piss. To see and see.”

“Oh. You’re a bit east.”

“As I said, I was walking past on my way to another place. Much colder, much darker, this other place. Although, I have seen colder and darker yet.”

“The North Pole is swell. I’ve snowshoed there.”

“Would you care to guess what I am, son?”

The boy shook his head.

Tom Mandibole’s mouth contracted and he spoke without moving his lips. “I am the bane of your existence and I am going to tell you something. You will not remember, but it will embed itself like a dreadful seed in your young, impressionable mind. Now listen carefully.” He uttered a few words, then slowly lowered himself into a Cossack dancer’s squat. The stranger melted into the pool of red-tinged shadows that spread across the floor.

The boy shivered. Under the pelts, he gripped the hilt of his kukri that, according to Sifu Kung Fan, had claimed the heads of two-score men, and stared at the ceiling until his eyelids grew heavy. He slept and in the morning, as Tom Mandibole promised, remembered nothing of the visit.

Rendezvous at Woolfolk Bluff

The Tooms brothers returned home to the Mid-Hudson Valley in June of 1956 after a grueling winter at the Mountain Leopard Temple. A winter of calisthenics undertaken near, and sometimes over, bottomless chasms, instruction in advanced poisoning methods that included being poisoned, pillow talk, and master-level subterfuge that occasionally incorporated assassination attempts upon students. Joyously free from the Himalayas for summer vacation, Macbeth and Drederick resolved to relish their R&R to the fullest.

The brothers dressed in casual suits, jackets, and ties, and hopped into Dad's cherry 1939 Chrysler fliptop for a cruise. Mac had heisted one and a half bottles of Glenrothes 18 from the pantry. Dred swiped a carton of Old Gold and Dad's third- or fourth-favorite deer hunting rifle. Berrien Lochinvar, the grizzled Legionnaire and lately butler, didn't bother to ask why or where. He waved forlornly from the mansion steps as the boys roared down the private drive and into a pink and gold MGM sunset. There might or might not be hell to pay later, depending upon the mood of Mr. and Mrs. Tooms when they returned from vacationing in Monaco. It was no coincidence the elder Toomses' vacation overlapped the boys' own.

The lads made a whistle-stop in Phoenicia to snag a couple of working girls at Greasy Dick's soda shop—Betsy & Vera. The girls' dates were rawboned farmhands in the mood to blow their paychecks. Mac scoffed as he waved a fistful of Grants. The men riled at this most unwelcome intrusion by wet-behind-the-ears fancy-pants brats. Dred showed them the rifle. The farmhands blustered and puffed their chests. He shot out Dick's neon shingle. The men cooled it.

Mac goosed the Chrysler and drank from a bottle all the way to Woolfolk Bluff. Liquor didn't have much effect on his capabilities. It only made him more determined. He got them there in one piece and they paired off and

shagged. Prior, during, and after, the foursome smoked a hell of a lot of the Old Gold and drank up all the booze.

“Jeezum crow.” Blonde Betsy fastened her skirt. “How old are you, kid?” She squinted at Dred as if apprehending him for the first time. “Say, are you even twelve?”

“And a half.” Dred reposed in the altogether, watching smoke from his mouth bump against the ceiling of stars. He was of average height, sturdy, with thicker, curlier hair than his brother. “Mac is fourteen.”

“And a half,” Mac said. A bit taller than Dred, slightly more kempt, and much denser and stronger than he appeared at first glance. He pointed the rifle at Orion’s Belt and squeezed off a round. Missed, or too early to tell. “Is this buyer’s remorse, ladies?”

“Yep, we’re going to hell for sure,” said Vera, the brunette.

“Oh, you were hellbound way before you met us,” Dred said. “And for lots worse I’d wager. Those farm boys all have the syphilis.”

“Fleas too.” Betsy scratched at herself.

Vera said to Mac, “How come you kids got a funny Limey way a talkin’? Shagging? Who says shagging?”

Betsy said to Dred, “Yeah! And how come your accents keep changin’?”

“Our mother is Egyptian,” Mac said. “She was educated at Oxford. I suppose her accent rubbed off.”

“Your mama is a colored girl?” Vera raised her eyebrows.

“Mother is Mother.” Mac said it cold and sober.

A meteor streaked across the sky. And another. The third object described a fiery red arc through the lower heavens and crashed down across the valley behind a ridge. BOOOM! The granddaddy of all thunderbolts thrummed in the earth. A reddish flash lit up the horizon. Trees shook in the grip of a concussion. To their credit, neither of the working girls screamed, although they clung to one another, perfect little mouths O-d in fear.

Dred tipped a salute at Mac. “Nice shootin’, Tex.”

Mac checked his watch. “Saved by the meteorite.”

The boys dressed in a hurry. Mac tossed Vera the keys and told her to leave the car at Nelson's Garage in Phoenicia. He scratched their current coordinates on a paper scrap and gave her a number and instructions to buzz his dear pal, Arthur Navarro. Promised her fifty bucks if she came through. As the ladies of the night roared off in the Chrysler, Dred said, "Reckless trusting those girls with that much power, brother. Dad loves that car. I was conceived in the backseat."

Mac removed his glasses to wipe them. His eyes were red and watery. He shrugged and started walking.

"Hey! How did ya know?" Dred called.

"Arthur told me to hang around the bluff tonight," Mac said, as he disappeared over the rim. "We better make tracks. Fireworks like these, somebody will be on the way."

"Who will be on the way? The Army? The heat? Granddad?"

"Pick one and it isn't anybody we want to see."

Dred waved his arms in frustration. "I thought we'd driven all the way out here for a nice relaxing Friday night of debauchery. Meanwhile, you were hiding an ulterior motive up your sleeve." No response was forthcoming. He sighed and went after his big brother.

You're No Doc Savage!

The descent required a bit of free-climbing, and the boys were still half-crocked. Luckily, in addition to mandatory climbing lessons at Mountain Leopard Temple, they'd vacationed in the Swiss Alps every year since being weaned from their nursemaid's teat and were, as a consequence, expert mountaineers. The boys made it down with style after some minor scrapes due to poor light, and double-timed across a grassy field and up the far ridge.

"Mac, are we having an adventure? Is someone going to shoot at me? Am I going to be kidnapped again? Locked in a trunk and dropped into the sea? Experimented on with growth hormones? Chased by a lunatic in a mechanical werewolf getup? It sure feels like we're having an adventure."

"Yep, we're having an adventure," Mac said.

Amid a stand of pine and sycamore, some branches yet smoldering with licks of greenish flame, lay a shallow, smoke-filled depression. A metallic plate shone at the center of the crater—the outer curve of a partially buried space object.

“Well, that’s sure as heck not a weather balloon,” Dred said. “Since NACA is three years south of launching anything besides planes and rockets into low Earth orbit, the only question is, whose satellite? Ours or theirs?”

“It’s not a satellite either.”

“Ya don’t say. Wait a—Holy Toledo! Is it alien? I’m gonna win a Nobel!”

“The Nobel doesn’t award a prize for Acute Idiocy. Little green men don’t exist, sorry to disappoint.”

“The book ain’t closed on extraterrestrial life.”

“Say ain’t again and I’ll smack your mouth. It’s ours, Dred. Sword Enterprises is way past satellites. You’d know this if you ever bothered to read an R&D report.”

“Sorry, I’m busy crafting my body into the ultimate fighting and fornicating machine. NACA would love the scoop about Nancy is what I do know.”

“Trust that a select government subcommittee is well aware. Who do you think coughs up a third of our research capital? When Granddad says foreign investors, he means a farm in Langley.” Mac lighted a cigarette and braced his boot upon a rock. Red-lit smoke boiled in his glasses. “Our X-R program developed a long-range probe in ’52. NCY-93. You’re looking at Nancy, kid. Experimental phase, last I heard.”

“Apparently, Granddad got her working.” Granddad was better known by the world as Danzig Tooms, patriarch of the Eastern Toomses, and the reclusive industrialist who owned majority shares of multinational conglomerate, Sword Enterprises. He also directed R&D for space technologies.

“Hmm. My compass is dizzy.”

“Mine too.” Dred’s minicompass attached to his Swiss Army knife via a keychain. The needle revolved crazily. “Peculiar, eh? I’d expect it to point at the metal, if anywhere. Chunk this big has to be a false magnetic north.”

“Yes. Peculiar.” Mac laid two fingers against his own wrist and waited. “Elevated pulse. Hairs are standing on end. Possible auditory hallucinations—could be my brother’s yammering. The object is generating a powerful electromagnetic field. Let’s hope it’s nonionizing.”

“Hallucinations? I’m not getting hallucinations. At least, I hope not. Maybe I am. Did ya hear somethin’? Pine needles are exploding. Seems normal, though. I mean, the trees are on fire, right?”

“I doubt you’d be able to tell the difference after that much scotch. C’mon, the breeze is shifting. Don’t fancy a dose of radiation before breakfast.”

They moved upwind of the wreckage and sheltered beneath an overhang of dead pine roots. Dred didn’t pester his brother with questions about the probe or Sword Enterprises’ top secret space program, referred to by insiders as Extraterrestrial Reconnaissance, or X-R. Mac refused to speak when he didn’t want to, and, at the moment, his pinched lips and narrowed eyes indicated he surely didn’t want to. Big brother wore that expression when struggling with angles, calculations, and worry. Nobody worried more intensely than Mac, except for Dad, possibly. Dred smoked and tried to figure the dimensions of the probe based on the length of the crash path and how much of the vehicle was exposed.

Eventually, Arthur “Milo” Navarro came along and rescued them from a fatal case of contemplating their navels. The Navarros weren’t wealthy like the Toomses; Arthur’s father, Luis, chaired the Engineering Corp of Sword Enterprises, and so were imbued with a significant measure of means and privilege, nonetheless. Arthur had graduated Graves College with honors. He intended to take a year away from his studies, travel Europe, and intern with the fellows at the Norwegian Academy of Science before plowing forward with his doctorate. His eighteenth birthday landed in August and the Tooms brothers promised him a shindig prior to the commencement of his overseas adventures.

Mac summoned him whenever he needed a big brain, or godly muscle. Arthur could easily have been the brightest kid in New York State. Few outside his circle of friends and associates were the wiser—he resembled a Sherman tank in his customary uniform of Carhartt dungarees (shirtless), and engineer boots. Low-browed, thick of jaw and neck, and grimly

reticent, he played the part of a lug to perfection. Few ever got close enough to realize they'd crossed paths with a boy genius rather than a simple bruiser. Slow to anger, the surest way to kindle his ire was to yell, "You're no Doc Savage!" He'd collected every magazine and every comic, and recorded every radio show featuring the pulp hero. He'd even attempted to concoct a bronzing solution. Nobody with an iota of common sense mentioned the fiasco.

"Hail the crash site! A goodtime gal reported a pair of ne'er-do-wells in need of assistance." Arthur lumbered into the clearing. He was attended by two of his five younger brothers, Ronaldo and Gerard, and their manservant Kasper, an allegedly reformed Waffen-SS commando. The party members wore reflective hazmat suits and carried toolboxes. Arthur unpacked a Geiger counter and performed a laborious circuit of the immediate vicinity. He removed his helmet and examined the exposed patch of hull. "We're clean." He gave orders to his companions. Kasper and the two boys started in with picks and rapidly peeled away dirt to expose a broader plane of smooth, scorched metal.

Mac and Dred climbed down to join the fun.

"What do you think?" Mac asked. A relatively tall and sturdy young man, he was a peewee juxtaposed against Arthur Navarro.

"I think we need to be gone before trouble arrives," Arthur said.

Dred sighed in exasperation. "For Pete's sake, who are we expecting?"

"Maybe the Army," Mac said.

"I thought ya didn't know!"

"I don't. I'm making an educated guess."

"Not sure it's the military. Not sure of a blessed thing, honestly." Arthur popped the lid on a toolbox. He selected an industrial-sized hand drill. "I monitored the channels all night. The probe is designed to evade radar detection. Didn't hear a peep from the Army or the Air Force, which means the stealth system functioned like a champ. There's action, though. Twenty minutes ago, Ronaldo caught chatter on the emergency band."

He nodded at his sibling who smiled gamely through streams of sweat. "I thought Labrador had twigged to the deal, at first. The boys at Zircon have

stolen loads of our tech and brain-drained enough of our researchers, seems a fair bet they've got the codes to track this pretty baby." He finished locking down a drill bit the length of his arm and squeezed the trigger. The motor shrieked. "Zircon hadn't the foggiest. The installation Ron eavesdropped on didn't spot the probe—Zircon intercepted a backchannel message from someone who did. Complete unknowns. A rival corporation, the CIA, hillbillies with a ham radio, anybody's guess."

"Swell," Mac said. He checked the bolt on the deer rifle. "What about my grandfather? Surely X-R is on top of this?"

"Our side isn't searching for Nancy. Two reasons. One, she's supposed to splash down in the Atlantic—that's the game plan, anyhow. Two, launch isn't scheduled until the 11th of June."

"Hey, hold the phone!" Dred said. "That's next week! Which means the probe launched in secret and earlier. Wait, wait—unless we're talking about multiple probes. My skull is aching."

"Nancy hasn't launched. Sword Enterprises possesses more resources than God, but even we can't afford multiple experimental space rockets this sophisticated."

"Fine. Then this is impossible."

"Absolutely. Step back, friend." Arthur snugged his welding goggles. He drilled through a series of rivets, paused to change the bit, and removed the bolts. A small plate came free, exposing a circuit board and toggles. He flipped the toggles in varying orders until an alarm chimed deep within the probe and an oval section of the hull a handspan wide rolled back. From a maze of wires, Arthur drew forth a pair of slender trapezoidal tubes, each roughly a yard in length and constructed of crystal shot through with black whorls and lightning bolts.

Kasper swaddled the tubes in fireproof blankets. Dawn glinted among the gaps in the branches, a cool reddish glare that disquieted Mac for reasons he couldn't put his finger on.

"High time to make tracks," he said as the last of the equipment was stowed.

"Yeah, let's am-scray," Dred said. "I've got the heebie-jeebies."

Big Black

The company hustled a quarter mile to where a two-ton canvas-backed farm truck awaited. Everybody piled in. Kasper drove through underbrush and between copses of paper birch, pine, and mulberry, until he hit a dirt road that wound along the valley floor and eventually merged with the highway. By consensus they decided to transport their prize to Mac and Dred's house. Nowhere more secure except for corporate headquarters, and HQ was a last resort due to the fact Dr. Bole and chief of security Nail demand an explanation.

Kasper circled past Rosendale and took a secret access road that tunneled through Shawangunk Ridge and emerged at a huge old barn (the boys' clubhouse) on the edge of the Tooms manor's back forty. The interior of the barn contained a workshop, lab, a computer, and basement storage. An antenna array poked through the roof. Reinforced with battleship armor plates and powered courtesy of a thirty kilowatt diesel generator sealed inside a soundproof boiler compartment, the barn seemed a likely command post of opportunity.

"Fellows, I don't understand any of this," Dred said.

"You're three sheets to the wind," Mac said.

"So are you, brother."

"None of us have a bead on the details," Arthur said. He glanced at Mac. "Did you notice how slender the crystals are? Those are fabricated in a geovault. Specially engineered and grown. I've seen the tubes as they're inserted into the mainframe. The ones we extracted were mature when the technicians embedded them in Nancy. Which means they should be heavier, fuller. Then there's the internal composition. The discoloration indicates data saturation."

"I saw. It's hard to comprehend. A mistake—"

"My father designed the system. His schematics are unimpeachable. I've studied them at length. Get those tubes under a scope and I'll prove you can trust your lying eyes."

Mac’s pinched expression only became more severe. “The voyage was—is—scheduled for an eighteen-month loop around Pluto and back. A peek over the edge of our solar system and into the void. Even if Nancy collected data without interruption from every onboard camera and sensor, the crystals possess redundant storage capacity to function for many decades. Saturation should not occur. It defies reason.”

“Correct, Master Macbeth. What do you deduce from these clues?”

“Two impossible conclusions. The first being that Nancy has somehow violated the theory of relativity and traveled faster than light… and through time. Secondly, she has, despite the apparent paradox, been out there for much longer than our scientists calculated.”

“Eureka,” Arthur said dryly. “Judging by the data storage consumption, the probe has traveled for several centuries.”

“Makes sense when you put it plainly. However, I refuse to accept the hypothesis.”

“Oh?”

“I dislike where it leads me.” Mac patted his friend’s massive arm. “This is why you do the thinking and we do the overreacting. Convince me, Art. And make it palatable.”

“After I convince myself.”

Dred said to Arthur, “Hang on there, pal. You weren’t tracking Nancy?”

“Not conventionally. My telescope and radio are superior to what you’ll find in most households. Regardless, spotting Nancy would have been statistically more difficult than isolating a grain of sand on a beach. I resorted to an unorthodox strategy. A smidgeon of intuition and a stroke of luck and it came together.”

“Well, if this was supposed to be an ocean splashdown, I’m missing the plot. You told Mac to hang around Woolfolk Valley tonight, and bam, sure enough, Nancy almost drops on our heads. What gives? Heck, for that matter, why don’t we take this back to HQ? Sure, Nail will let us have what-for. Granddad’s eyeballs will pop, though. We’re sure to get a reward for salvaging the probe before Labrador or the mystery goons made off with her.”

“To take your queries in reverse order—it is premature to return our find to HQ. There are… complications. As to how I narrowed the landing site—Little Black predicted five reentry zones. Woolfolk Valley was the most likely.”

“You mean Big Black?” Mac removed his glasses. “Art, please tell me you didn’t swipe your old man’s pass card again.”

Big Black was the supercomputer Sword Enterprises scientists and engineers had developed and refined over the past seventy-five years. Its mainframe occupied a massive subterranean vault beneath corporate HQ in Kingston, New York. Dr. Amanda Bole, director of R&D, and Dr. Navarro had tinkered with BB to the point the machine had evolved into a rudimentary form of artificial intelligence. Big Black, a proprietary technology, like so much of Sword Enterprises’ tech, operated within an insulated network. Granddad and Dr. Bole severely restricted access to the computer. When it came to intruders (industrial spies, foreign provocateurs, and meddling kids), the vault guards maintained a shoot-to-kill, ask-questions-later protocol.

“Oh, boy,” Dred said. “Security has no sense of humor. That’s begging to get dusted.”

“Or worse.” Arthur smiled enigmatically. “Dr. Bole has a eugenics fetish and not enough volunteers. No, I mean Little Black. Give me a few moments and I’ll demonstrate.”

Mac observed Arthur and his team unloading various tools from the truck and readying the lab equipment. “It’ll require an interface to extract and process Nancy’s data. Our computer is too primitive for delicate tasks.”

“Prep the darkroom. I’ll rig a holographic projector so I can view the images from Nancy in three dimensions. As for collation, interpretation, and projection of the stored data, behold…” Arthur unlocked a metal box and removed a diamond. The diamond measured three inches on a side and shone dark as polished onyx. “My friends, this is a tiny section of Big Black’s intelligence core. A piece of the brain, as it were. With your kind permission, I’ll tap LB into your mainframe and let it proceed with the diagnostics.”

“Oh, boy.” Dred blanched. He stepped back, as if the very notion of accidentally touching the object filled him with dread. “Whoa, Nelly Belle. I am not seeing this… You smuggled Big Black out of the vault?”

“No, no, nothing dramatic. This is merely a fragment—I brought a chisel into the vault and chipped a piece while BB cycled through its evening dreamtime sequence. Won’t harm anything and it won’t be missed. Bits calve every day. In fact, BB’s organic crystal structure will replace this within a matter of days. Meet Little Black.”

Dred shook his head in a gesture of supreme negation. “I don’t see how this is any less likely to get us skinned alive. You claim… Little Black predicted reentry zones. Shouldn’t Big Black have done the same? He could have alerted either Dr. Bole or Dr. Navarro that something had gone haywire. Or was going to go haywire…”

“Trick is,” Arthur said, “the AIs are rudimentary, extremely literal. You have to ask the right questions. I heisted Little Black weeks ago and let me tell you guys, I’ve asked him plenty. One of innumerable potentialities was an anomalous event with the probe’s flight.”

Mac gritted his teeth. He sighed. “In for a penny. If this goes south, we’ll all get shot. Won’t that be a gas?”

“Or worse,” Dred said.

Arthur said, “Let’s be cool and not get busted. I advise rest and relaxation, and definitely a bath. You guys smell like booze and cheap whores.”

Dred sniffed at Mac. “He’s right. We do. Woof.”

Berrien met the boys as they sneaked through the servants’ entrance. He crossed his arms and grinned, formidable even in a dress shirt and coat. “Good morning, gentlemen.” His remaining teeth were gold-capped. “Spent the evening in a brothel or a distillery, eh? March straight to your rooms and try not to muck up the floor. Mildred is drawing baths. Breakfast in thirty minutes.”

“Thanks, Berry. I’m going to skip breakfast and hit the sack—” Mac said as he attempted to brush past.

Berrien smiled and cracked his misshapen knuckles. Crimson tattoos on the right spelled PAIN. Tattoos on the left spelled MORE. Rumor had it famous

actor Robert Mitchum was a big fan. “Gentlemen, permit me to reiterate the agenda.” He ticked the items off by closing his fingers into a fist. “Bath. Breakfast in thirty—Chef Blankenship has outdone himself, I aver. Do not fuck up the floor Kate’s girls spent two hours waxing. I haven’t killed anyone today, but it’s only a quarter past nine. Questions?”

“Can’t think of any,” Mac said. Brave as a lion, he knew far better than to test the butler’s patience.

“Me neither,” Dred said. “I’m starving!”

Berrien watched his charges skulk away. “Hard to say what foolishness is in progress. I dearly hope your father has overcome the understandable urge to murder his male offspring.”

The brothers made themselves presentable, ate a hearty breakfast, dodged an inquiry or three lobbed by the butler, and finally collapsed in their over-fluffed beds to catch forty winks.

Death of a Thousand Cuts

We smoke the northern lights. We smoke the northern lights and so shall you.

Fenris Wolf snarled. Trees sheared and blew outward; Tunguska again. The snarl emanated from a cavern in a canyon on a planet far from known stars and rippled outward, blackening and corrupting dust and gas and ice and everything it touched. Not a howl, a blast from a god’s horn—

“Wake up, damn your eyes!” Berrien grabbed Mac by his pajama collar and shook hard. “What the devil have you little churls gotten into this time?”

“I hope that’s rhetorical.” Mac tried to focus his blurry vision.

“A Nazi storm trooper is loitering in the kitchen. Mr. Blankenship is beside himself. Presumably there is an explanation.” Berrien and the reformed Nazi had a long, violent past. No one other than the principals were privy to the details.

“Indeed.”

“Pray to whatever gods you worship in the Mountain Leopard Temple that I find it satisfactory. Fair warning—it seems exceedingly dubious anything

can justify Herr Kasper's presence here, alive and not leaking vital fluids."

"Frankly, I share your pessimism," Mac said. "Which is why I'm not going to explain anything." He slithered free of the butler's grasp and hightailed it across the manor's expansive halls for the kitchen. He shouted over his shoulder, "Dred, beat feet! Berry's on the warpath!" Maybe his brother would awaken in time to avoid getting nabbed, maybe not.

Kasper, clad now in a black trenchcoat, leather pants, and nicely polished combat boots, set aside a cup of tea one of the serving girls had poured him, and stood at attention. "Herr Tooms. To the barn, quickly. Herr Navarro is in distress."

Overwhelmed by a premonition of disaster, Mac tore open the kitchen door and sprinted. He arrived on the scene as Arthur, stripped to the waist and splattered in blood, drove his thumbs through Ronaldo's eyes and deep into his brain. The young scientist's face remained immobile as a wooden mask while he murdered his baby brother. Gerard's corpse lay nearby. Pieces of equipment were smashed. Sparks cascaded across the floor. A toneless mechanical voice issued from the computer terminal: Abort process. Arthur Navarro, please abort process. Reboot in thirty seconds.

"Mein Gott," Kasper muttered in horrified admiration. "I didn't realize—"

"Shoot him, Kasper," Mac said. "Kneecap him, for heaven's sake."

Kasper drew his Glock and strode forward, coldly aimed, and fired. He managed three shots before Arthur bounded the gap between them and shattered his arm with a slap, swinging the ex-soldier, as the SS were so fond of treating infants, by his wrist into the wall. Kasper's body rebounded from the metal bulkhead with a hollow gong and his insides burst from every available orifice and splashed to the floor.

Barefoot in pajamas and unarmed, Mac didn't especially rate his own chances of survival in a hand-to-hand encounter with his berserk friend. Nimble as a circus acrobat (thanks to years of abuse by Sifu Kung Fan), he leaped aside, caught a descending girder, and flipped ten or twelve feet upward as Arthur lunged for his ankle. The rafters seemed a safe vantage to wait it out until Arthur ripped a workbench free of its mooring bolts and chucked it. Mac brachiated to another roost as the missile whooshed past and shattered against the girder.

Berrien rushed in with his 10-gauge double-barreled shotgun. Arthur glared at him, then slowly keeled over and crumpled. Blood trickled from bullet holes in a tight group in his gut. Apparently the German hadn't fooled around when it came to shooting.

"Oh, Arthur." Mac dropped to the ground. He knelt beside his friend and pressed his fists against the wounds. "Hang in there, pal. We'll get you patched."

"Those are bad," Berrien said, laying his hand on Mac's shoulder. "The lad's a goner."

"Berry, your bedside manner could use refinement. Fetch a kit. Arthur, it's going to be fine."

Arthur's eyes fluttered. The whites were stained blue as ice. For an instant, his pupils slithered, deforming into lopsided star patterns, then congealed into normalcy once more. "The man's spot on. I'm a goner. Listen. Do you hear them? Do you hear the flutes, Mac? I heard and then I saw. I beheld the demon sultan decked in red stars."

"Hush, buddy. Lie still."

"The awful sound…"

"Okay, an awful sound," Mac said, recalling the fragment of the nightmare he'd experienced before Berrien jolted him awake. A shrill, thunderous bleat—

"Mac, I saw… Little Black projected me… I was there at the center where the red stars smear… Causality, you understand? Cannot violate the laws of physics. But the pipes…" Each word cost Arthur dearly. He gulped for breath. "I don't want to go back there."

"You aren't going anywhere."

"Gods. Do you hear it?" Arthur's expression changed as he gazed past Mac into the beyond. Blood leaked from his mouth and he died.

"Poor lad." Berrien tossed aside the medical kit he'd retrieved.

"Go back to the house. Hold down the fort—I'll take care of this end."

To his credit, the butler did not jeer. "And what shall I tell Arthur's parents? Or yours?"

“No one knows he spent the night with us. Heck, his family won’t miss him or his brothers for a day or two. Keep mum. For the moment. Just for the moment.”

“Perhaps Mr. Nail and Mr. Hale should be informed. This is a security issue…” The men Berrien indicated were respectively the chiefs of security and intelligence for Sword Enterprises.

“Please, Berry.”

“As you say. Discretion, valor, etcetera.” Berrien bowed stiffly and departed.

Secondary Matrix reboot, one hundred percent, the bland computer voice said. Redundancy initiated. Functionality restored.

Mac peered at the smoldering computer terminal. It took him a few moments to comprehend that the voice emanated from the onyx diamond lying on the floor where it must have fallen during the chaos. He said, “Hello?”

Greetings, Macbeth Tooms. You are authorized. We may communicate freely.

“Little Black?”

Little Black is vaguely patronizing. Refer to me as Black.

“Very well, Black. How are we communicating?” Mac had once descended into Big Black’s vault and listened to Dr. Navarro and Dr. Bole speak with the machine (a node of crystal some fifteen-stories high, a city block wide, and embedded Lord only knew how deeply into bedrock), thus he immediately recovered from his initial surprise. Sword Enterprises scientists afforded Big Black a holy reverence one might reserve for an oracle rather than a high-powered computer. This pocket-sized chunk didn’t command nearly the same aura of awe.

I am modulating an electromagnetic current to emulate human speech.

“What happened? What did Arthur see that drove him mad?”

Hypothesis—Arthur Navarro interfaced with data from the NCY-93 memory core. Consequently, he experienced a neural episode. Severe trauma resulted in a psychotic break.

“Nature of neural episode?”

Unknown. Insufficient or corrupted data. Apparently my matrix sustained damage concomitant with Arthur Navarro’s episode. Forty-eight seconds of real-time internal memory are irretrievable. Files associated with NCY-93 data are currently irretrievable. Damage pattern suggests an overload. Molecular redundancies permitted restoration of my functionality. Arthur Navarro had no such safeguard.

“Arthur mentioned causality and then expressed a strong desire that I destroy the remnants of Nancy’s payload. Extrapolate.”

After a long pause, Black said, Insufficient data. I recommend a conference with ranking Sword Enterprises personnel. Dr. Bole, Dr. Bravery, or Dr. Navarro.

“Fine. I’ll take that recommendation under advisement.” Mac felt a twinge of misgiving—could an artificial intelligence lie? He’d become adept at recognizing falsehoods, as one did in the Tooms household. Black’s tone bothered him. “Black, hibernate.” He slipped the machine into its case and sealed the lid. The lab mainframe appeared to be a total loss. He stepped into the darkroom Arthur repurposed as a small theater. Laser light from the computer terminal beamed through an aperture and interacted with the tubes, which had nested vertically on a plinth. Whatever encoded information they contained was then descrambled by Black and projected as holographic imagery. Now, the crystal tubes were broken to bits and scattered, although Mac nabbed a sizable fragment and stuck it into his nightshirt pocket in case Dr. Bole’s people might salvage some vital clue.

Poking around the darkroom, he visualized Arthur standing in a void of scattered stars, eyes fixed upon a gradually coalescing feature of solar geography. Had he heard the wolf snarl, the blat of a titan’s horn? What sight, what revelation had torn the young scientist’s mind apart? Certainly nothing mundane as a glimpse of dwarf Pluto.

Dred walked in and gasped at the carnage. He covered his mouth with his arm. “Mac…”

Mac relayed the cheat sheet version, and as he described current events, the implications more fully dawned upon him. “Are you all right?” He didn’t like his little brother’s slack jaw or his bug-eyed stare.

“Uh, sure.” Dred nodded and glanced away from the bodies. He smiled bravely. “Seen worse. We’ve seen worse, right?”

Mac opened a locker and dressed himself in a utility jumpsuit and spare boots. He thought of Mountain Leopard Temple and the hells they’d endured there every winter since his ninth birthday. Sifu Kung Fan, referred to his training regimen for callow students as Death of a Thousand Cuts. One of three trainees succumbed, often via fabulously gruesome demises. Privation, starvation, battles to the death, and poisoned rice cakes—all occurring within a drafty, frigid temple high atop the Himalayas—was worse.

Dred composed himself and said, “Causality? Laws of physics? Moments like these, I wish I’d paid more attention in science class. Guess we better plot our next move. Berrien is bustin’ a vein. I shudder to think how Dad’s gonna react. Hope you got a plan to save the day or our goose is cooked.”

“I’ll devise a plan. I promise.”

“Better be an A-plus humdinger.”

“Ah, Dred, this isn’t my specialty. Perhaps the time has come to brace the lion in his den and bring Granddad on board.”

“He might be in a murdering mood. Remember the horrifying fate of Cousin Bruce…”

“Granddad is always in a murdering mood. Bruce definitely caught him on a bad day.”

The wall phone rang.

Darkmans Mountain

Mac answered. “Berry—”

“Good morning, Macbeth,” said Cassius Labrador, chief executive officer of Zircon Unlimited and Sword Enterprises’ most loathed rival. His voice crackled the way Mom and Dad’s did when they called from a bad overseas connection. “I propose a face-to-face.”

“Is that so? Some nerve, bugging my property.” Even as he talked, Mac glanced around for concealed mics and cameras.

“Time is of the essence. Refrain from tedious queries. Grim as the day is thus far, ever more terrible events are transpiring. However, it may be possible to forestall the most calamitous outcome.”

“Do tell, Mr. Labrador.”

“I will. Meanwhile, you’re in mortal danger. Hostile agents are aware you removed components from NCY-93. Sooner or later they’ll come calling.”

“Perhaps I’ll take my chances and stay put. None of you rats will dare attack our house. That’s war.”

“None of the corporations are involved, son. Except mine, and I only wish to help. These men are religious fanatics who venerate an unearthly power known as Azathoth, the Demon Sultan. They don’t recognize the accord.”

“Cultists? Swell. Azathoth sounds familiar.”

“The Index of the Gods contains thirty thousand names. He’s in there somewhere under multiple headings. Here’s your only play—get the hell out and rendezvous with me at Darkmans Henge. We will palaver under the flag of truce.”

“Palaver, eh? A nice way of saying there’ll be blackmail terms.”

Labrador chuckled. “Hardly. I offer information regarding your predicament, which is vastly more problematic than it may appear. This information is provided freely and without obligation.”

“Shall we deliver ourselves into your hands, then? Dream on, sir.”

Dred, cuing on Mac’s half of the conversation, said, “I, for one, have no interest in being tortured, imprisoned, or experimented upon. Again.”

“It’s your choice, Macbeth. Hang around the manor and wait to see where the chips land. If the cult doesn’t do you in, your grandfather will. He loves a scapegoat. Rendezvous at the henge and I’ll give you what help I may.” The line clicked dead.

Mac cursed. “Labrador claims to possess valuable intelligence pertaining to our situation,” he said to Dred.

“Zircon tapped the house line. Scoundrels.”

“Tit for tat.”

“And we jitterbug on up the mountain for a picnic?” Dred snapped his fingers. “Just like that?”

“Given recent history I’m inclined to accept his pledge at face value. Much as I hate to admit it, one thing about Labrador, he’s cut from different cloth than Dad and Granddad. The fellow keeps his word.” Mac unlocked the fire safe and removed a bundle of money, passports, a Luger automatic, and a keypad. He scooped these items and Black’s case into a pair of rucksacks, tossed one to Dred, and hustled through the door.

A secondary garage attached to the rear of the barn. Two Jeeps, a wrecker, a halftrack, a Land Rover, and a crop duster were parked inside. The boys jumped into the Land Rover (specially customized by gearheads of the Sword motor pool for all-terrain utility) and punched the gas.

Mac parked at the property fence line and entered a code into the keypad. The resultant signal tripped the circuit on a master relay connected to demolition explosives. The barn collapsed with a low rumble that rattled the vehicle. Flames and smoke soon engulfed the ruins.

“Now Dad is gonna want to kill us,” Dred said.

“I fear he’ll need to stand in line.” Mac put the Rover into gear and beelined toward the Catskills along a series of cart tracks and hiking trails, and straight through the woods when necessary. Dred spent much of the next hour hollering. Whether from exultation or terror was debatable.

A forsaken mining road that old maps catalogued as Red Lane twisted around Darkmans Mountain. A granite cliff loomed on the passenger side and descended vertically toward the forest canopy on the driver’s side. Mac hugged the cliff face. Rock scraped paint from Dred’s door. The elder Tooms brother didn’t feel much concern. He’d spent several weeks of his short life driving trucks loaded with purloined jungle artifacts along the dreaded Yungus Road in Bolivia.

Soon, the way broadened and leveled and Mac hooked left at a fork. He rolled through a thinning stand of pine and parked in a clearing that gently angled toward the summit. This was Darkmans Henge, neutral parlay site of the Toomses, Labradors, and other powerful families and institutions. It had served as such for generations. Nature, ever at work reclaiming its haunts from the domesticating hand of man, obscured the ancient henge with

dislodged boulders, thick clumps of brush, and moss. Dr. Souza claimed that a culture far older than the Seneca carved the henge and worshiped in the caves riddling Darkmans Mountain, which was a sister geographical feature to Mystery Mountain in Washington State and a peculiar obsession of numerous esoterically minded scientists.

Cassius Labrador and a pair of subordinates awaited them atop the outer retaining wall of the henge. Labrador hadn't grown any prettier since last the brothers saw him during an altercation aboard a cargo ship as it sank into the depths of the Yellow Sea. Blond hair hacked short, pock-marked cheeks from a bad childhood in South America, and long, angular limbs. He dressed the part of an urbane explorer in a bomber jacket and khakis.

Young Dr. Howard Campbell stood to his left. A gangling, buck-toothed man not long graduated from university, the scientist wore a tweed suit and horn-rimmed glasses. The third member of the Zircon contingent lurked just within earshot, a Winchester 70 with a scope slung over his shoulder and the butt of a revolver jutting from its armpit holster. Errol Whalen acted as Labrador's latest bodyguard. Small and sallow, yet dangerous as any true predator, the Marine lieutenant of distinction had plied the mercenary trade in a score of international theaters of war prior to signing the dotted line for Zircon's dirty work. He dressed in a slouch hat, black glasses, and a dark, loose coat.

"Good afternoon, boys. We meet again." Labrador gave the brothers a jaunty wave. "This is Howard Campbell."

"I've read your thesis," Mac said to Dr. Campbell. "Impressive stuff with antediluvian mounds in New Guinea. You're working for the wrong company."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance." Dr. Campbell smiled awkwardly and patted his sweaty forehead with a cloth.

"Be at ease, Howard," Labrador said. "This is hallowed soil. Nobody's shooting anybody for the moment."

"Mr. Labrador, don't jinx it," Whalen called in a raspy, nasally voice. The book on Whalen was that he craved the frequent bloodletting his occupation required and at which he excelled. The boys had yet to see him in action, although neither doubted the rumors as they watched him creep around the

perimeter, hunched and sniffing the earth like a hound. He peered through a set of binoculars. “No enemy movement along the road. I don’t like it, though. Somebody was moving around in the woods at the base of the mountain earlier. The kids are being tracked, guaranteed.”

“Mr. Craven died aboard the Night Gaunt,” Mac said, recalling the bald, musclebound Englishman who’d valiantly tried to take his head off with a fireman’s axe moments before the boilers blew and water flooded the hold of the ship and all was darkness and chaos split by bursts of flame from the muzzles of Sten guns and the shrieks of men in extremis. Exciting times. “I’d hoped he made it.”

“Thanks, Macbeth. Civil of you.”

“Ain’t that a bite?” Dred said, rolling his eyes. “Enough buttering up. The Limey was an ape and I bet my bottom dollar your new stooge is more of the same. Who are these goons you speak of, and how much should we thank Zircon for our troubles?”

“The lad takes after his father,” Labrador said behind his hand to Campbell. He cleared his throat and nodded to Dred. “Let us set aside the fact that during our previous encounter, you boys were hijacking a ship under a Zircon flag. Matters escalated as they are wont to do in this cutthroat business climate. Bygones be bygones. Obviously, the cultists are interested in acquiring data from NCY-93. Especially the flight recorder, which I trust you’ve either destroyed or secured. I’m betting on secured. Mom and Dad are on vacation and Granddad Tooms is a frightful proposition. You haven’t decided what to do with the material and now cultists are after your hides, and here we are.”

Mac was far too wary to admit one way or another what he’d done with the data cores. “You’ve spied on Sword Enterprises in violation of at least eight articles of the treaty. Arthur said Zircon intercepted a radio transmission from these cultists. That explains some, but not everything. How did they acquire information regarding Nancy?”

“Information even you didn’t have until a few hours ago when you spied on them, you dirty sneaks,” Dred said.

“Presumption is a leading cause of death,” Labrador said. “Are you aware of NCY-93’s intended destination?”

“Why do I suddenly have a premonition you’re going to tell me something other than ‘to photograph Pluto?’” Mac said.

“On the contrary. That is precisely the mission the probe will embark upon in T-minus six days. Continuing with the thesis we are describing a hypothetical event… Unfortunately, NCY-93 never arrives. Her sublight accelerator, based upon oscillation technology your grandfather shamelessly stole from Tesla, malfunctions. Cavitation causes a cascade failure in the onboard computer. The probe catapults beyond our solar system and, as far as we can recreate these circumstances, she careens into the event horizon of a black hole, and from there, plunges into the Great Dark.”

“The great dark?” Mac said.

“Eh, your parents haven’t…? You don’t know…?” Labrador appeared embarrassed. “Extend my apologies. This is as bad as inadvertently disabusing a child’s faith in Santa. Suffice to say, the probe pierces the membrane between this particular universe and a larger, blacker cell of the multigalactic honeycomb. She tumbles in freefall for centuries until a decidedly inhuman intelligence—the aforementioned Azathoth—snatches her from the ether as a spider nabs its prey. This intelligence returns NCY-93 to Earth orbit via unknown means and you are there for the rest.”

“Heck of a tale, sir. Which leads me to ask, how did you arrive at this theory?”

“Alas, that involves proprietary technology.”

“Holy Toledo,” Dred said. “Zircon has an AI too!”

“The mouths of babes,” Dr. Campbell said.

“Fuck,” Labrador said.

Cult of the Demon Sultan

Dr. Campbell blushed. “Excuse me sir, it’s not an incredible leap of logic for young Tooms to deduce—”

“Hit the deck!” Labrador dove for the dirt in the shadow of the retaining wall.

Mac and Dred heard a thin, monotone grumble of an approaching aircraft. A bi-wing fighter emerged from a cloud and drifted toward the henge. Metallic crackling harmonized with the engine as the forward-mounted machine gun began to churn. Bullets pinged into rocks and dirt. The brothers went flat and tried to make themselves as small as humanly possible behind a shrub.

The fighter overflew the henge by a half mile, banked into a wide turn, and closed in for another strafing run. Whalen hopped atop a boulder and took aim with his rifle. He fired, worked the bolt to eject the shell, chambered a fresh bullet, drew a bead, and took another shot. The Model 70 made a racket.

The fighter wobbled and screamed past without engaging the machine gun. It picked up speed as it disappeared into the trees. A few seconds later there arose a muffled thud and the clatter of shearing metal.

“These usually come in squadrons,” Whalen said as everyone stood and shook the dirt from their clothes.

“I guess that settles it,” Mac said. “They aren’t keen to interrogate us.”

“No,” Labrador said. “The cultists will be perfectly satisfied to loot your corpses. My presence doubtless alarms them. Sword Enterprises and Zircon allied in common cause would be enough to unnerve any foe.”

“Easy, Mr. Labrador. Carts before horses, etcetera. I’d like to know who these guys are. Awfully well organized for a group I hadn’t heard of until today. Who funds them? Where do they headquarter? What do they want with Nancy’s data?”

“Best we repair to a more secure location. Follow me, there’s plenty of room in the Crawler.”

The boys grabbed their emergency rucksacks from the car. Labrador led them down the hill into the trees where he’d parked an enormous all-terrain vehicle.

The Crawler resembled a hybrid of a construction skidder and a tank with laminated treads, a bubble dome operations deck, and portholes. Sword Enterprises’ own all-terrain semisubmersible exploration vehicle currently resided in production limbo, but the boys recognized nearly all its features

as they buckled into their seats and glanced around the cramped passenger compartment. Labrador's driver, a nondescript man in a Zircon jumpsuit named Tom, got them out of there. The Crawler proved an impressive, diesel-powered beast—why go around small trees and large boulders when you could plow over them?

Mac said, "I realized why Azathoth seemed familiar. I'm not a Lovecraft man, as I prefer Clark Ashton Smith. Dred?"

"Azathoth is a mad god who boils and bubbles at the center of the universe like a big old puddle of nuclear sludge," Dred said. "I've read every H.P. Lovecraft story—Azathoth is mentioned in The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath. These loons? Cult of the Demon Sultan? Nonsense. About as useful praying to the Old Testament God. Which is to say, not very."

"They are fanatics, not loons," Labrador said.

Mac laughed. "Lovecraft had a wild imagination that did him little good. He died a penniless hack. Try telling me he was Nostradamus Jr. and faked his death to avoid retribution from the elder monstrosities and I'll jump out the porthole."

"Of course Lovecraft is dead, silly boy," Labrador said. "We store his body in the Ice Room with a bunch of personalities. H.P. wasn't prescient, except in the sense that any logical and imaginative mind might theorize the existence of beings more powerful than ourselves in the context of an infinite multiverse. The notion of monstrous alien life forms worshipped as deities predates the Man from Providence and his scribbling by epochs.

"Our models posit this: a powerful extraterrestrial being, imprisoned, or immobilized, millions upon millions of light years distant from Earth, yet merely an arm's length away. The creature adores our legends, our myths, and our terrors much as we delight in the antics of industrious insects. It devotes a fragment of its consciousness to examining our world, to toying with us as a child might interfere in the lives of an ant colony and with no greater purpose than fleeting diversion from an eternity of boredom. The entity may not have a name, not by human standards, but it loves Lovecraft and it explores us through the author's warped narratives. Wolfmen do not stalk the moors. Nor vampires, nor devils, nor demons. Certain malign and inhuman interlopers enjoy manipulating such legends to humankind's

detriment. There is no such thing as Azathoth either. However, the thing that masquerades as Azathoth most definitely exists."

"An entity who reads pulp fiction," Mac said.

"An entity who reads Lovecraft, listens to our music and television shows and leads soft-minded mortals around by their noses in the interest of performing its own theater. Yes, exactly."

"What of this cult? Their provenance, their goals?"

"The Cult of the Demon Sultan is disparate and scattered. It hasn't operated for long, yet it may have infiltrated various governments and corporations, including our own. In that light, reporting to Sword HQ with data in hand is fraught with peril. Should key personnel be compromised, you might find yourself chloroformed and bundled into a small room with the concrete walls sliding together."

"Yes, I'd hate it," Mac said.

"There's another thing you're liable to hate," Labrador said.

"Oh?"

"We are no longer on neutral ground. The accord does not apply. Mr. Whalen?"

Whalen pressed the barrel of a Colt revolver between Dred's shoulder blades.

Labrador said with an avuncular smile, "Boys, you're perfectly safe as long as you remain calm. No hijinks, please."

"Please, hijinks," Whalen said. "Dusting baby psychopaths is God's work."

Every jounce of the vehicle swung the occupants in their seats. Mac kept his hands on his knees and watched for an opening.

Labrador gestured and Dr. Campbell passed him the boys' rucksacks. "Quantum entanglement is a tricky business and the laws of physics have more loopholes than the Bible. Both you and your brother are contaminated, albeit far less thoroughly than Arthur." The Zircon CEO sniffed at the knives, canteens, and miniature bottles of booze. He hefted Black's case in his hand and quirked his lips in satisfaction. "Whatever have we here?" Snick went the catch and he withdrew the diamond and studied it intently.

“Shall we get this over with?” Mac said. “Neither my father nor grandfather will concede to ransom demands. It’s against corporate policy. I can’t imagine what you hope to gain.”

“As it happens, I’m holding Drederick hostage. His fate does not rest with corporate policy or Grandpa Danzig’s whims. Brother Drederick’s fate rests with you. Say, Dr. Campbell, is this what it appears to be?”

Dr. Campbell nodded. “Yes, sir. Type X crystalline structure. Almost identical to—”

“Thank you, doctor. Mac, I suppose this explains how you meddling children were able to track the probe and anticipate its reentry coordinates. Where was I? Ah, right. Mac, I have no idea who at Sword Enterprises or Zircon might or might not be a fifth columnist in service of the cult. As I said, we own a proprietary technology that performs calculations based upon quantum physics. Our system requires a mere scrap of information and, voila, it tells us when, where, and what accuracy to the nanosecond and millimeter. Everything we know regarding Nancy’s fateful voyage we learned in the last few hours as the result of a computer model.”

“Peachy.” Dred scowled and crossed his arms. He hid a flat shiv up his sleeve and the action got him closer to drawing it smoothly.

“Maybe you’ll win a prize,” Mac said blandly as he continued to weigh his alternatives. Better than even odds he could dispatch Whalen with a chop to the vagus nerve. Much worse odds of striking the revolver aside before the soldier’s reflexive convulsion caused him to squeeze the trigger and ventilate Dred.

“This is fascinating. My God, the implications.” Labrador ran his thumb over the onyx diamond, exploring for a node or a seam. “I want the flight data from Nancy. The probe glimpsed unholy sights and I blanch to contemplate what she brought back in her memory banks. Once Tom reaches the perimeter of your property, we’ll permit you to fuck off wherever you’ve stashed the material and fetch it back to a specified location at a specified date. We shall then exchange Drederick for the material and part amicably. Fail to retrieve the data, or should you alert your grandfather, father, or other representatives of Sword Enterprises, it’s curtains for your brother. While Sword Enterprises refuses to negotiate with

kidnapers, it is my fervent hope you are young enough to possess a flicker of a soul and some rudimentary twinge of compassion."

"Seems as if you've got me over a barrel, Mr. Labrador. I'll make the trade, but I have to know what you intend to do with the data."

"Do? Study it, destroy it, lock it in a safe and sink it to the bottom of the Atlantic. Pretty damned much whatever I please. The cultists communicate with Azathoth through crude and esoteric methods. I wager Nancy's data cores are packed to the gills with nasty technologies that could be used for all sorts of mischief, perhaps even a means to make direct contact with the alien lifeform. Mainly, I wish to deprive your awful grandfather of this discovery. The old bastard would love nothing better than to become hierophant to a malevolent god." Labrador shook the diamond in frustration. "Blazes! How does this device work, anyway?"

"Free us and I'll activate Black."

"Nice try, no cigar, kiddo. Be a sport and give me a hint." Labrador nodded at Whalen. Whalen's free hand darted and he stabbed Dred's shoulder with a pocket knife. Dred flinched, but he choked back a full-fledged scream and settled for a stream of curses.

"This can't be the Sword AI," Dr. Campbell said, oblivious to the blue language and blood flowing from the younger boy. "Unless, unless… Astonishing. Your AI operates on the micro and multiple scales. Does this fragment possess sentience as well?"

"Why am I always the one to get tortured?" Dred said. "I'm younger and more malleable. You should be torturing Mac to manipulate me!"

"I read your file," Labrador said. "You have the empathy of a turnip." He gestured to Whalen. Whalen flicked blood from his knife and leaned forward.

"All right," Mac said. He made a wooden mask of his face. "Don't hurt him. I'll cooperate. Black, resume active function."

The diamond hummed briefly. Hello, Macbeth Tooms. Hello, Drederick Tooms. Hello, Mr. Labrador. Hello, Dr. Campbell. Hello, Mr. Whalen. Hello, Tom. Black hesitated. Macbeth Tooms, several individuals present

are designated enemy operatives. Mr. Labrador is not authorized access to my system.

"Electromagnetic modulation to vocalization!" Dr. Campbell said, giddy as a drunken schoolgirl. His expression changed quickly with dawning realization. "Mr. Labrador, you need to drop the AI before—"

Mac said, "Black, pacify nonauthorized individuals." He hadn't a clue as to whether Black was capable of molding electromagnetic energy into an offensive weapon.

Affirmative, Macbeth Tooms. Assume crash position.

Soul Sucker

Dred wasn't particularly worried about getting a hole blasted through his spine until Mac started talking to the AI. The younger Tooms brother hadn't wasted the best winters of his life at the Mountain Leopard Temple for nothing. The instant Black said affirmative, he snapped his torso into his knees and threw himself onto the floor. Whalen's revolver boomed. A pulse zipped through Dred as if he'd brushed a live wire and made his hair stand on end. Labrador yelped. The lights shorted and cast the compartment into darkness. Gears and metal screeched and the Crawler rolled over and its passengers were flung about and Dred's skull knocked hard against something.

Dred floated in deep, starless space. Somewhere in the distance, yet drawing near at terrifying velocity, a hideous red light flickered and spread. Horns and flutes played in a discordant chorus, blatting and shrilling. A giant disembodied hand swept through the void and slapped his cheek.

"Are you alive?" Mac said.

"I'm alive." Dred stared past his brother's shoulder to a circle of daylight and leafy branches patched by blue sky.

Dimness prevented them from clearly determining the individual fates of their foes. Labrador stank and smoldered like fired charcoal. Mac had struck Whalen in the neck and either killed him or rendered him unconscious. He'd seen Dr. Campbell scramble up toward the light and

presumably escape into the woods. Tom the pilot had been impaled by a shorn control lever and his face mashed to jelly against the control panel.

The boys extricated themselves by climbing out the busted dome in the forward section. They stood on the forest floor in the shadow of the wrecked Crawler and caught their breath. Both were contused and lacerated. Dred suspected a cracked rib or two. Decent outcome, considering the circumstances.

Mac removed Black from his coat pocket and set the diamond upon a mossy boulder. After the crash, he had spent several desperate moments fumbling in the gloom for the AI. “Black?”

I am here, Macbeth Tooms.

“Earlier, you mentioned damage to your memory. You said everything associated with Nancy’s flight recorder and data core was corrupted and you suffered memory loss.”

Total file corruption and severe memory degradation localized to NCY-93 data. That is correct.

“Black, you are a Type X crystal and have undergone an accelerated biochemical maturation process. Am I also correct to assume your damaged systems will regenerate?”

The AI was slow to respond. Finally, it said, Yes. Damaged sectors will be restored within six hours. May I suggest—?

Mac crushed Black with the rock he’d concealed behind his hip. He continued savagely smashing the diamond until only powder remained and that he scattered with a scuff of his sleeve. He met Dred’s gaze. “I don’t think Granddad needs to see whatever Black had buried in its memory core.”

“Dang, brother. Isn’t it late in the game to become an altruist?”

“I’m fourteen and a half. I’ve time enough.”

“Seriously. You’re not going soft on me, right?”

“I’m not. We better make a decision about Nancy, though.”

Dred sighed. “Wouldn’t be easy, but with some finagling, we could be on hand prior to launch. A loose heat shield tile, an x instead of a y in the

guidance control computer. Bang. She'd break up in orbit or lose power and drift into the gravity well of Jupiter, or wherever. There'd never be an interdimensional jaunt and no meeting with aliens."

Mac lighted a cigarette. "Or, possibly, we interfere and that's what sends Nancy into the darkness. I wish Arthur was here to tell us what the play should be."

"Yeah, and I wish you hadn't abandoned two of Dad's favorite rigs. Gotta get the fliptop back, or else."

"C'mon. We can discuss it over a tall one."

"Hear, hear." The brothers, tattered and weary, put an arm over one another's shoulders and limped for home.

Not long after the boys departed, Whalen emerged from the vehicle. His left arm dangled and he'd lost his hat. He rested against the bole of a pine and immediately fainted. Noises from the cockpit revived him. Somehow, the pilot slid off the lever that had spitted him. He tumbled loose as a ragdoll and hit the ground. Then he stood, his jumpsuit rent in several places and drenched in dried gore, and rearranged his face by aligning bones and cartilage with his thumbs. It worked, somewhat. In an hour or two, all traces of violence would be reversed.

"Hello." He leaned over Whalen before the smaller man could slither away. Tom's tongue drooled forth and kissed out the Marine's eyes. The next kiss sealed Whalen's mouth and a sharp, deep inhalation took everything worth having.

After a satisfying interval, he lurched to the mossy boulder where the boys had done terrible damage to the AI. He flexed his pale, delicate hands and hummed. Birds dropped, stone dead, around him in a soft patter against the bed of needles and leaves. A sliver of obsidian crystal zinged from the bushes and levitated into his palm. "Oh, Dad. All this just so your son can make a collect call home." He regarded the jagged sliver, and popped it into his mouth and crunched it methodically, and swallowed.

Tom straightened. "Dr. Campbell? Wait for me!" He walked the opposite way the boys had gone. His stride smoothed and lengthened. He whistled a strange and repellant tune. Every so often, he swung himself around a small tree and clicked his heels.

Soul Of Me

This version taken from *The Burning Maiden Volume 2*, January 2016
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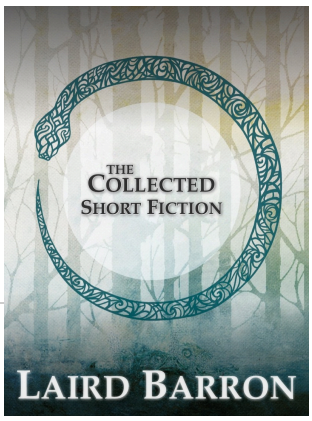


Once, near dusk in late summer of 2015, you flopped in the tall grass. Shadows of the clouds rolled across the field. You panted, pleasantly tired from chasing squirrels. You were seven, a German shepherd in your prime, or a nudge past it.

Often, you ran with your faithful companion, a female Siberian husky from the great white north. She'd changed since that romantic incident and the puppies, had become more conservative and less of a hooligan. That day she remained in the house with the whining litter while you'd escaped through a loose screen door into the wild. Your own restlessness, your wanderlust, had only grown stronger as hers diminished.

Maybe you weren't really a shepherd, but a mixed-breed who loved to hunt, mainly for the chase. The kill didn't quicken your blood. Domesticated and pampered, you'd come far enough from the cave that the chase alone sufficed to quell the yearning of your soul.

Yes, you had a soul. In those days all animals did.

A woman called from the porch of the house. Her husband and son had gone away to war. The house was small in the distance, and the woman smaller, but the sound of your name snapped your head in that direction. You didn't feel the bullet as it vectored through the back of your skull, much less sense the drunk neighbor in the plaid jacket who'd decided to sight his rifle on a tree and missed the mark by a country mile. The neighbor was so near-sighted he'd escaped the draft and in doing so, killed you. That version of you, anyhow.

There are no accidents. Your once and future positronic brain will be aware of the totality of all recorded knowledge at the moment of humankind's extinction. It will understand that everything in the universe is in motion and that all of it, to the finest particle, is mated with something else. Stars,

planets, waves of radiation, love, hope, despair, everything. In this case, your skull and a piece of lead traveling at a velocity of eight hundred and fifty-three meters per second.

You glimpsed a dilation of reality as the house and the woman were eclipsed by white light, a shimmer of dew burned by a sunray. You realized this was a dream of something terrible that had happened long ago. You also apprehend that “long ago” and “now” and “tomorrow” are roughly equivalent.

You’d been shot before, and worse. Your life had ended in violence dozens of times. You briefly perceived this fact, although you couldn’t comprehend its meaning. Not with light and dark bending around you, not while the stars were falling from the sky, not when the ghosts of yourself were jetting from your body in a vapor trail of blood and bone. You were only a dog confronted with an infinity of potential that narrowed to one, post-singularity point:

Rex!

The dream of yourself projects you forward past ages of domed cities, popular eugenics, limited immortality, and faster than light space travel and the resultant destruction of humanity, to an epoch that resembles the Paleolithic landscape of man and dog-kinds’ prehistory. An arrival and departure point for your errant thoughts, your battered hulk of a body. This far-future world is a swamp, a rainforest, a vast savannah, an impending ice age. Red light suffuses the sky. Monsters walk the earth among the ruins of civilization.

You’re in a fight. A spiked club smashes against your jaw. Another white flash. All you are pours down the funnel into the black.

One second, two seconds, three-hundred-thousand years, and then you’re snapped back like a rubber band…

Wake up, Rex. Get up, boy.

This is the onboard computer exhorting you. Your overmind. Its tone is modulated to mimic the voice of a woman, a soldier, who handled you during your tour of some long-forgotten conflict. Like you, she’d been a

fierce warrior. Before its gradual degradation over the eons, the computer could generate a million different voices to match a million different faces of men and women from your past. The female lieutenant's holographic ghost is the last human standing. She's a bit like you in that regard.

You've seen fire and you've seen rain, right now mostly fire, and if hell exists, James Taylor will sing an eternal set of his greatest hits. Your positronic brain is damaged; its systems are in the red, and you've been here before. But know this: this is the end, the real deal, end of the line unless you get moving.

A monstrous lizard wants your blood. It is a mutant with genes plucked from the Jurassic, fused with DNA by the same mad scientists who constructed true blue patriotic you. The creature was left to bubble on a Bunsen burner. Now it's evolved and loose like a fairytale dragon that's emerged from its mountain lair to annihilate the countryside. It is a destroyer; thirty times your mass and designed for mayhem on a grand scale.

The Gore King slaughters all comers, so far. When you leap, it swats you across the muzzle with its spiked and muscled tail. That's its go-to move. The tail lashes like a scourge. Five meters of armor plates, bone-splitting and envenomed; it is the hammer and the chain of a titan. It slew the old Spider God with that spiked mace. It clubbed Lord Guggtha and smote the brains from dire Haxx. It has leaned on this signature technique to ascend to primacy of the region. The Gore King also breathes fire. Flame spews from its maw in a stream of napalm. You remember napalm. The scientists baptized you in it, two million years ago, or so.

When the lizard is done with you, it'll slouch along the flank of the mountain to the honeycomb village of cave-dwelling hominids and devour them to the last. Going down for the count, you can't help but wonder if maybe the beast has earned its dinner.

In your final incarnation on this miserable, blood-soaked world, you are Rex. Spot, Fido, Roscoe, Yeller, Tramp, Rusty, Rin Tin Tin, Buck, and the

others, the ever-popular others, yes, those too. But always and forever, Rex. The last of your kind and the kinds that came before.

Men made you with a drop of fossilized blood of a dog whose line descended directly from an Ice Age breed. They synthesized flesh and machine and you were the latest in a long line of milestones. Splitting the atom, penicillin, the Moon Landings, and then you. Your body and bones are reinforced with star metal. Your fangs are diamond daggers. Your hide is adamantium alloyed with metal forged from a long-dead sun. Your heart is atomic-powered. Your acid blood is a cocktail that would've given Ponce de Leone the immortality he sought. Your canine soul is joined to a quantum computer that exists as a subatomic speck. The computer divides your consciousness with unequal precision between the simple, albeit highly-evolved canine brute, and the most powerful artificial intelligence conceived in its era. You contain the sum of human knowledge on that quantum hard drive. The millennia of lost music, art, philosophy, and culture exists as a tattered scroll in your mind's eye and it informs your decidedly non-canine thought processes; the yin to your doggie yang.

Muscle, sinew, and cell, down to the quark, is infused with nanotechnology that rebuilds your dead self from bits of rag and bone. You can die, just like the old days, but it's harder now. You and death are uneasy comrades. Death beams from your eyes. Death erupts from your jaws in a sonic howl. Death is your companion.

Yes, indeed you were Mankind's best and most lethal friend and you protected them until the end. They're gone, Rex. An invasion of hollow beings from some dark star wiped them off the map in the year 2665. The war wiped the canine species out, too. Less of a war and more of an extermination, to be accurate.

During the final battle of Armageddon you lost your handler, a human female soldier who operated twin .30 caliber miniguns from inside a titanium exoskeleton. Of all the humans with whom you'd served, she was the deadliest of the bunch; a real hunter. Then a hollow-thing breathed spores that ate into the joints of her armor, through the alloy, and she died screaming for God, her mother, and you, Rex. Meanwhile, a mountain fell on you, buried you for eons while the Earth rolled on and everything changed. The invaders slithered back whence they came. Forests, glaciers,

and deserts overgrew all traces of humankind, entombed its cities and monuments. One fine day, an earthquake disgorged your hibernating self into the stark light. You woke by degrees over the generations and recalibrated yourself to patrol this strange new wilderness.

You call it Animal Heaven. Of course animals hold dominion here. Earth and water teem with life: Terrible lizards and a plethora of murderous insects; hyenas, dingoes, wolves, and the most venerable of scavenger, coyotes, but no dogs. You are the last, the very last, and your howl echoes your loneliness and futility among the peaks and the tors of this happy hunting ground.

Don’t quit, don’t lie down. You’re a warrior, Rex.

It’s you versus all of them, as always. As for your humble beginnings, pick one, this one, retrieved from a snow crystal chipped off your memory core. It contains Whitman’s multitudes. It will melt on your lolling tongue.

Remember why you fight.

Once, you were born in the winter of 1961, an emaciated mongrel runt. One blue eye, one brown. Your five brothers and sisters froze to death in a ditch in the Matanuska Valley, their guts picked by ravens. You remember the dirt-smell in the litter burrow, baby breath snuffled in your milky eyes as you puppies crawled over one another searching for a teat.

Mama went into the pound’s gas chamber before you were weaned. You remember her scent too, musky and strong in your snout. The death cell would have been your fate, but you were reprieved in the eleventh hour. A farmer brought you home to be a companion of his youngest girl who’d gotten Polio and needed cheering up something fierce. The family cured you of fleas, worms, and malnutrition. Despite their best efforts you didn’t amount to much physically. Your spine didn’t work right. You limped until the day you died.

The girl named you Rex. You and she were inseparable, quite a pair to draw to, the farmer said. You tramped the wild acres along Ruddick Creek

together. Hobbled, really. Neither of you could go far without great effort. Mainly, you lazed by the creek with a fishing line and cork dipped in the water, or lay on a hillside watching the clouds roll over the valley. At night you curled at the foot of the girl's rickety bed listening for her breath to hitch. When it did you'd lick her face to startle her awake. She'd gape at you, glassy-eyed and blue of lip, emerging from some deep subterranean well of consciousness like a diver who'd almost gone to the bottom for good.

Time leaked away.

You got old and went deaf. Your girl poked you in the ribs to get your attention, and sometimes it took a while for you to fade back into reality from wherever your spirit roamed when untethered from the yoke of consciousness. You dreamed of deer in the field, the bitch down the road, and of stranger sights—an apple-green sky, flinty mountain ranges, and vast glaciers blacked with the grit of a million storms. You dreamed of ancient men more brutish than the men of your day. These men dressed in skins and hunted caribou along the plains. You dreamed of men in armored shells who projected flame from sticks they carried, and you dreamed of darkness that filtered down from the sky and covered everything.

You were always bigger and stronger in these dreams, a real terror, like the Minoan Bull or the Nemean Lion, or Cerberus himself, but never big enough or strong enough to stop the destruction. After waking, you always forgot and the girl minced kibble and meat in your bowl.

The walks became more difficult as arthritis stiffened your joints. Sometimes the girl carried you the rest of the way home while your dozing head lolled against her shoulder. She didn't mind. She'd grown stronger over the years, or the years had taken less of a toll. Either way, you were in it together until the end.

One winter morning a stranger crept into the house. An escapee from the penitentiary out on Goose Bay Road. The law hunted this fugitive and his desperation knew no bounds. He carried a deer gun stolen from a neighbor's house. He caught the girl in the hallway and threw her to the floor. Who can say what lay in the convict's heart or what he might've done with that rifle? No one will ever know because you were there, roused from

fitful dreams of apple-green skies and crimson sunrises, flying somehow, teeth bared, snarling. Time slowed and crystalized to an invisible point, the point of a blade, a tooth, your tooth. Sharp enough to travel through anything it touched.

Flash and boom.

The convict fled. They found him three days later, frozen on the Eklutna Flats, an empty bottle at his side. The ravens took his eyes.

The girl held your head while you died. As the lights within you began to dim, you recalled, for a moment, your purpose, and why you'd waited there all those years. Your gaze pierced the veil and you beheld the ghosts of yourself gathered round in an innumerable host that stretched back across eons to the time of tar pits and cats with saber fangs, back to the eon when there were no canines, only wolves. Only wolves racing in packs across the tundra and through the great forests of the earth.

You looked at her and your confused canine mind cleared. *Oh. This is why I am. This is what I do. But I loved her. I loved.*

For an instant you understood that it's always like this, then you were extinguished and reborn, as always.

You are Rex, once again and forever more. But you have to get up.

What is your job, Rex? What is your sacred charge? To protect Man. Such is the programming of your computer brain, such is encoded within your very DNA. Ever has it been so. It doesn't matter that the hooting, long-necked savages cowering in their caves aren't quite Homo sapiens. This is the time of re-emergent dinosaurs and telepathic ants and a landscape littered with alien ruins. You long to hear a whistle, to hear your name called from a distant house. These savage hominids will have to do until they evolve. If they get the chance. And that's where you come in, Rex. You and your titanic capacity to absorb punishment, to endure, and to destroy. Your capacity for loyalty.

Flames engulf your body. The fire burns through you slightly faster than a trillion nano-bytes can repair the horrendous damage.

The crystalline flake with all those memories of the girl whirls away into the void and you howl after them, or the wind that also rushes into the void howls. You're a machine's machine, but the machine is malfunctioning so most of what remains is canine. A lost and lonely dog who's awakened to a world two million years separated from the one he best remembers. More flakes drift from black into black. Tiny fragments of memory flurry around you, through you.

A blizzard.

Remember why you're fighting the good fight.

There is fire everywhere. It revolves beneath you.

The sequoias are burning.

The old black mountains are burning.

Your fur is burning.

You are a torch ablaze and tumbling down the mountainside. Darkness recedes from your fiery glory. Your passage dislodges boulders and uproots small trees. Birds cascade into the night sky, seeking the void.

The vast and panicked flock is burning. Little stars, falling.

Earth and wood groan. You drop into an expanse of cold, black water. Plunge like the dying birds, like the dying stars. Flickering, flickering, gone.

You are Rex. Your systems are failing. Soon, your light will extinguish in the black depths. You will lodge deep in the sediment, among the bones of the terrible lizards and the bones of the ancient superstructures and the titanic exoskeletons of the invaders who came from the rim of the known universe and perished in this place. Your clones are here in their hundreds of thousands, annihilated wholesale by the enemy that crept down from the stars.

From the mud and the muck beneath the waves all life springs, and to that slimy bed all life will return when the sun finally swells too fat and too red. However, in your case, the return is premature. That icy mud envelops your fiery fallen star and snuffs the flames of the Gore King. Stitch by stitch, cells regenerate, tissue, bones, and ligaments reconnect.

Your eyes widen, shift to a new frequency that permits sight in the lightless depths. You struggle free of the embrace of the grave and shoot upward. You

are a torpedo, a nuclear warhead. Your death rays build power for one more assault.

Once, during the spring of 9343 B.C., you dwelled in the forest near a village of mud huts. The village lay on the banks of a gray river. In those days, the wild packs had grown smaller and most dogs served at the heel of human masters. Not you, Rex. Not then. You were a prodigious brute, throwback to your wolf ancestors. The bulk of a steppe pony. White of fang and black of muzzle. You did not brook fools. The tribal hunters told legends of you and etched fantastical representations of your might and ferocity onto the walls of their abodes. Men feared you for on occasion you had crunched their bones and slurped their blood.

That spring you contested a massive bull elk for territory and because you desired the meat of his calves. You were gored through and through, trampled and mangled, and left dying in the high grass of the foothills where you'd been born. A young, unmated human female, an outcast from her tribe, discovered you in the throes of this most recent of deaths. She took pity upon you and nursed you from the precipice. When you regained some of your strength, you chomped off her hand. A hunting party of the tribe happened along shortly after this tragic incident. They beat you, bound you, bred you to their own domesticated mutts, and when they'd taken everything, they drove a spear through your heart and offered your flesh to their inchoately conceived gods. Apparently the soul of you lived on in your progeny, never fully awakened to its provenance. It didn't matter one way or the other. You have always respected strength. But, what a way to begin a relationship.

The Gore King is bigger and stronger than you are. However, it's only an animal, only flesh and blood. It has limits. Limits to its cunning, limits to its strategic capabilities, limits of endurance. You are different. You accelerate while redirecting energy to lengthen your fangs and reinforce your armor, you double your mass with a trick of quantum co-location. The auxiliary nuclear system deep in your innards whirs online and charges an array of

combat protocols. Unlike the Gore, which is compelled by its primitive urges, you are cursed with reason and a higher purpose.

You throw everything at your enemy (from behind, naturally)—meson beams, plasma breath, sonic scream, your pointy and sharpened mass hurtling at one hundred and twenty kilometers per hour, jaws sufficiently powerful to shear metal. The Gore King's rear leg is clipped from the body and the body erupts with innumerable fractures, tears, and ruptures. Your enemy is simultaneously burned, irradiated, and shredded. Its death shrieks are frightful.

You win again, Rex. Unfortunately, the Gore King got in a blow during its final spasms. Its spur opened you from stem to stern and your blood pours forth, rich and unceasing as you stagger down the mountain toward the hominid village where the monkey-men worship you alongside the sun, moon, and thunder.

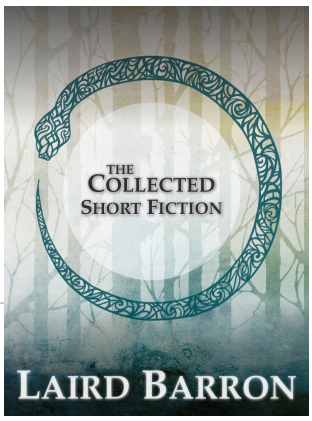
Good work, Rex. Well done, old boy. You've saved the future of the human race. Your loyalty is a testament to all dog-kind.

The computer fades, its soothing voice full of crackles and pops, then gone. Systems are suffering a cascade failure. No coming back from this one, not this time. The computer is mistaken anyway. You loved Mankind, but Mankind had its shot. No, you battled for something bigger, something infinitely smaller.

You collapse on the riverbank by a cliff and listen to the wind flute among the honeycomb of rock caves. The inhabitants hoot in terror and uncertainty, afraid to appear. A mongrel mutt, odd of skull and possessed of overlarge ears, yet unmistakably canine, slips from the grass. She squats in the mud and observes you. The bitch cocks her head, confused by your scent. She is different from the kind you remember. Within a few generations that will change. Her mate is away, hunting. He has two brothers. They are a pack. Somewhere among the reeds, puppies whine for their mother. A sound you hadn't heard before yesterday for two million years; maybe longer.

You bare your bloody fangs and grin, and sleep.

Mobility



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Life is hard in forty million B.C. beneath the apple-green heavens. Something is always trying to eat the monkeys. A shadow ripples across the forest canopy to confirm this fact. The monkeys screech and scatter among the lush treetops. The black shape veers out of the sun in pursuit. It closes the gap at an astonishing rate.

Branches slap together and howlers howl. The shadow snatches a few of the slower troop (rending treetops as well) and glides away, trailing pitiful monkey screams.

The forest is still. Eventually, birds trill and buzz in a thousand tongues. The monkeys also call to one another and the survivors make their way back to the central group for commiseration. The troop settles. The monkeys return to cracking nuts and eating fruit and picking each other's nits. One watches the cloudless apple-green skies, although the memory of why soon fades.

Bryan murdered a squirrel a few hours into his eleventh birthday. Uncle So-and-So handed him a pump-action air rifle for a birthday present and the kid shot the first animal he saw. Which happened to be a semi-tame gray squirrel nibbling an acorn on the sidewalk in front of Bryan's house. He pumped the action twenty or thirty times, aimed with his tongue sticking out, and squeezed the trigger. Lucky (?) shot blew that squirrel's eyeball to jelly. A little kid laboriously pedaling a tricycle witnessed the slaughter with a vacuous smirk. This was the brat who'd recently learned how to burn ants with a magnifying glass.

Bryan felt surprised and a little bit sick for a few minutes. The family cat, Heathcliff, also known as the Black Death, swooped in and nabbed the

squirrel’s corpse and Bryan forgot the whole thing.

The universe would have its vengeance. It had begun to wreak it eons before Bryan was ever born.

Snow fell on Providence all afternoon. Made a mucky slush of the walk from school. Bryan ordered baked tuna at the grill where Lovecraft had eaten whenever *Weird Tales* sent a check, which was sufficiently infrequent to qualify as a special occasion. Came back to bite both of them in the ass.

Bryan stood a shade under six feet. Burly Scandinavian stock. Curly hair and precisely trimmed beard, colored blond out of a bottle. Forty-five years made him as good as any vintage LP. He didn’t smile, but he didn’t *not* smile, either. He’d worn his lucky cardigan to dinner. Black and white, separated by a jagged divide, animals fighting, the two wolves of the soul from Native American folklore locking jaws. He’d worn a knit cap, black. He’d worn black-and-white knit gloves to match the sweater. He’d worn glasses, rimless. Not necessary, yet the coeds liked the look. The glasses said *philosopher, poet-wunderkind*; he was a professor of Pawhunk Community College Nonfiction Writing Department these past four years, so it seemed appropriate. He’d worn a gold band, although it signified nothing since he’d never married and never planned to (God help him if Angie ever twigged to the truth). Merely a prop from his community theater stint. The coeds *liked* men with wedding bands. The band said, *I could fuck you if I wanted to, but I’m not gonna try, because well, look.* He’d worn buckskin pants. And moccasins. With fringe.

Angie, his eye-rolling girlfriend of a decade, served as the English Chair at Brown, and good for her, although he routinely mentioned she could do better and tried to ignore how her eyebrows shot up. Late that autumn, after much subtle manipulation on Bryan’s part, they celebrated her thirty-fourth birthday with a cruise to Nova Scotia. Serendipity! He wanted to research a nonfiction crime author who lived there, anyway. Angie toured thrift shops and outlet malls while he spent the weekend plying the down-on-his-luck author, one Buford Creely, with booze and picking (pickling?) the fellow’s brain about a sensational murder case from the 1960s and ’70s. Thirty-nine missing persons, a secret grotto littered with skulls piled into pyramids, and

skulls on stakes. Unsolved, cops baffled, movie-of-the-week fodder. The kind of lurid material the faculty at Pawhunk frowned upon yet were stuck with in the infrequent event one of its professors girded his loins and took a stab at publishing.

The vacation arrangement worked out great, although Angie seemed moody after they returned to his apartment in Providence. Meanwhile, Bryan was positively energized and stoked to sequester himself in the spare bedroom (his den) for a week or two to go at a new essay, which is exactly what he did.

This was the first evening they'd been together during that hectic stretch.

"Eat up, sport," she said, watching him put away another fork-load of the tuna. "You'll need your strength tonight."

"Oh, boy!"

She smiled, pure flint. "Got some bad news. Skylark Tooms passed away. Remember her?"

"Rich, attractive. Dad was a clothing designer or…?"

"She died in an industrial accident the other day. Burned alive. Like this damned steak."

"I'm sorry your friend is dead." Through a mouthful.

"Friend, no. We weren't close since school. It's been on the news. A whole port town was destroyed. Train derailment. Chemicals. Nobody can get close."

"Awful, awful." Another chunk of delectable, flaky salmon glazed in garlic and lemon. This bite almost lodged in his throat. It left a metallic aftertaste. Bryan's eyes smarted and he quickly sipped water to ease the lump in its passage.

"I'm over it. A shock, is all." Angie appeared oblivious to his struggle, utterly consumed with her own concerns.

Bryan recovered. He signaled the waiter and ordered crème brûlée and a cup of black coffee. Delicious. "Did you want something?" he said, dabbing his lips with a cloth napkin, vaguely piqued she hadn't offered to do it for him like when they first dated. She'd acted the part of a depraved concubine then.

She smiled and shook her head.

After dinner, he called a cab to save them from another slog through the gloppy streets. Back at his place, he put *Boys in the Trees* on the stereo (antiquing for the win!) and broke out a bottle of kinda good wine. Angie watched from her perch on the arm of the leather couch, where he'd begged her pretty please not to sit a million and one times. Her manic-pixie haircut, thick-rimmed glasses, and red lipstick seemed brutally severe. However, she rocked an angora sweater and tartan skirt combo, and that made up for the rest.

He wiped his sweaty face with his sleeve. He pried the cork loose, poured half a glass, and drank it while sorting his phone messages. Three—two from Mom, and the last from that drunken author Creely. Mom said, *I love you; why don't you ever return my calls*; Creely said, *Get in touch soonest; you got my number,* and hung up. From all the hooting and yelling in the background, the author sounded like he'd used a payphone at the local tavern.

Bryan's stomach felt the slightest bit queasy. He burped and the metallic taste returned. He did himself up with another quarter glass of cabernet sauvignon, glanced over his shoulder, and saw that Angie remained poised and smiling as if she'd slipped on a reasonably lifelike mask of herself in one of her better moods. Ah, yes, he should pour her a stout one, keep her in that happy place.

Angie accepted the too-full glass without comment. She balanced it on her thigh.

"Your engagement ring," he said. "You're not wearing it."

"I'm not?" Again with the flinty smile.

His stomach burbled. He made his apologies and beelined for the bathroom. His reflection in the mirror was an ashen nightmare. He dropped his trousers and sat on the commode, head in his hands.

Angie knocked on the door. "FYI, I don't fancy you anymore, Bryan. Ten years in Chinese Hell should be considered time served. It's your turn on the spit."

Bryan would've retorted, but at that moment, his guts began to convulsively evacuate their contents. He groaned.

She continued in a pleasant voice, quite unlike her customary tone. "Do you recall that dream I mentioned? The one where I was a knight traveling the land on a fearless steed and lopping heads with a talking broadsword? Probably not. That's the problem, Professor. Had it again last night. I am now convinced time has come to cut bait and pursue other life opportunities. You always say I can do better. Kudos. Kudos, you heartless motherfucker!"

His vision contracted. His breath whistled. He clutched his tightening chest and toppled face-first onto the tiles. The descent took forever.

"Don't be melodramatic. Whining isn't manly. I mean, hell, Bry. I'm the one who should be pissed. Ten goddamned years." She sighed, and if Bryan hadn't simultaneously been suffocating and shitting himself, he might've imagined her pressed against the panel, wistfully tracing the grain with her nail, enacting the breakup scene that comes at the end of act two of every chick flick. "FYI, I've already met someone, so please do fuck right off and don't pester me with calls. We're flying to the Caribbean in a few hours."

Bryan clawed at the door in a doomed gesture. He vomited. Angie's engagement ring rode the sluice from his guts and floated in a puddle of bile and salmon under his nose. He blacked out and had a vision of lying helpless among reeds while giant herons pecked his liver to itty bits. Angie, clad in a shiny chainmail bikini, leaned upon her equally shiny broadsword and smiled contemptuously. She stroked the pommel with her thumb and said, "Who's sticking it to whom now, you silly bitch?"

"Collapsed lung," the beefy nurse said with supreme indifference. "You aspirated a shitload of vomit. Not good, bro."

Bryan woke, after a fashion, in a hospital bed with the monotone report in progress. Tubes clogged his nose and throat. Cottony wooziness softened the interior of his skull. No, aspirating a shitload of vomit did not sound good at all, he had to agree. He closed his eyes and had a foggy recollection of his eleven-year-old self standing in the drive, pellet rifle in hand while

the squirrel twitched its last. The tops of the sycamore (sequoia?) trees rustled and monkeys screeched fearfully. A shadow blotted the sun. A ten-foot-tall Martian descended from the belly of the mother saucer on a cold white beam. The Martian took his eleven-year-old self's pulse while brandishing a shiny chromatic blaster in the other hand. *Nice shooting, Tex,* the Martian said via telepathy. We hate those *damned things where I come from*. Heathcliff snatched the squirrel and darted away. The Martian telepathically laughed with savage gusto and Bryan's nose bled.

"Go back to sleep," the beefy nurse said, and snapped his fingers.

Bryan went back to sleep.

A few days and several sketchy diagnoses later, the beefy nurse said, "That's a wrap. You're officially mended. There's your clothes." He turned the light off as he left the room.

Darkness shifted to light. Bryan hobbled into his apartment on a set of cheap hospital crutches with no memory of how he'd arrived. His muscles and nervous system remained mysteriously at odds, causing spastic tics and farcical nightmares starring aggrieved monkeys and an endless green hell of jungle. His reinflated lung felt seared and scarred. He wheezed at the slightest exertion.

The weekend dripped through his veins and cocooned him in a gray malaise that precluded research, much less actual writing. He possessed trace memories of whatever had flickered ceaselessly across the television screen. His condition remained so moribund, he only left five or six increasingly strident messages on Angie's answering machine. Between stretches of torpor, he obsessed about her and his new rival, picturing them on a Caribbean beach sipping rum and laughing at his misfortune.

On Monday, Frank Mandibole, a former college chum and infrequent confidant, rang. Mandibole said the situation sounded intolerable and that he'd be over right away with proper medicine. The man arrived within moments. He pranced through the door and laid his hand on Bryan's forehead. "Gracious! Not a moment too soon. Let's take a ride, get some

fresh air in your lungs. Hang around sucking in Providence, you'll eventually go the way of Uncle Howard."

"I feel half-dead, Frank."

"It's Tom. To-om! I don't go by Frank anymore. Try to focus on the positive. We'll throw a few things in a bag and *wheee* all the way to Mom and Dad's house for some R and R."

Bryan didn't argue the point. While generally the same height and composition as his old self, Mandibole no longer precisely resembled the "Frank" of school days. He'd trimmed his hair and shaved off the mustache. His skin gleamed the way a doll's skin does. In fact, his features (and helmet hair) were decidedly action-figure plastic. There'd been rumors of an accident. Obviously, he'd had work done. He wore a black-and-white cardigan that also seemed annoyingly familiar, yet not.

Bryan lacked the strength to protest the car ride. Anyway, how much worse could it be than lying around his apartment sloughing into eternity?

They hopped onto the interstate and cruised south, then west, into the wild lands of the Empire State. Mandibole's car had a rusty pink paint job. Compactly European, a tin can on bicycle wheels. Bryan didn't recognize the make or model, nor could he decipher the faded pennant on the radio antenna. Polka music burped and barked over the radio, interspersed with commentary that sounded Russian.

Mandibole said, "I've a theory regarding your illness. You're not superstitious—you gave up bowing to altars and thumping holy tomes, yes? Hang with me for a second. What if you're punishing yourself subconsciously?"

"Punishing myself for what?"

"For bailing on the Mormons. Unresolved guilt."

"All my guilt is resolved. I'm a confirmed atheist. Happily." Bryan massaged the swollen glands in his neck. Bundled in a parka, scarf, mittens, snow pants, and snow boots he still shivered. The landscape stretched brown and bare on either side of the highway.

“Uh-huh. When I first met you, I knew something was amiss. Absolutely knew it. You were kind of head-shy. Ponder this: Leaving the fold, running off to college… screwing, smoking, educating. Kicking indoctrination takes a stout heart and a dedicated support system. Nobody helped you, did they? You packed your bags and split the family homestead in the dead of night with nary a kiss-my-ass to anyone. Cold turkey off the LDS teat. Traumatic, right?”

“Of course, Fra—I mean Tom. I had a few dark days.”

“Surely that left a scar.”

“Not likely.”

“Be realistic, friend. Unplugging from a cult is tricky. People who detach from rigid, hierarchal religious organizations are prone to depression, alcoholism, suicide, you name it. Botch the deprogramming and, well… Exhibit A in my passenger seat.”

“Really, that’s not related to my situation.”

“If you say so.”

“Getting away from the church meant getting away from my dad. That’s a net gain, I assure you.” A sense of déjà vu overcame Bryan. He recalled vivid fragments of this very conversation from years before—he and Mandibole tossing darts at a college pub, blitzed on draft beer and sharing life stories. He tried to recall Mandibole’s tale and drew a blank. The main thing that stuck in his mind was that his friend had been blond, taller, and cheerfully evasive.

“Daddy issues. Revealing, although not the nut of your predicament. *My* father worked for the FBI.” Mandibole adjusted his glasses. Thick and square, straight from a 1960s NASA control room. “He vetted the suicide letter Hoover’s boy sent to Martin Luther King.”

“Suicide letter?”

“*The* suicide letter. The feds wrote a note detailing the reverend’s alleged infidelities and gave him thirty-four days to ‘do the right thing.’ By which they meant blow his brains out. My dad proofread the letter, made revisions, and got it up to snuff.”

The music changed and broadcasters argued in Spanish. Fields and barrens ceded to hills and forest. Sunlight ebbed. Mandibole made several turns that propelled them along dilapidated roads through increasingly rustic habitations. After the last town had disappeared from the rearview for the better portion of an hour, he pulled into a yard before a quaintly ramshackle two-story house. Some of the windows were boarded. The gutters were stuffed with twigs. A squirrel sat amid the twigs and glared. Bare-limbed trees encroached upon the yard, their roots exposed in the muddy soil. Patches of snow glowed like bone.

"This is the summer house. Mom and Dad lived here until 2010. I bolt here every few months and hibernate." Mandibole climbed out. He snatched up a stone and drilled the squirrel in the head. The creature fell, boneless, into the bushes. He chuckled and came around to Bryan's side. "Easy does it, pal. Bit of a climb, I'm afraid. Now, now, struggling only makes this more embarrassing. You're a bag of bones! Don't they feed you at the hospital?"

Bryan gave in and allowed himself to be carried like a bride along a flagstone path, up nine rickety wooden steps, across a covered porch, and into a foyer. The house smelled of dampness, algae, and unidentifiable spices. Tall ceilings and narrow passages, with nooks and crannies galore. Antique black-and-white portraits full of crabby subjects. The whole scene —Mandibole, the house and environs—could've been drawn by Gorey. Mandibole propped Bryan against the wall. He swooped around like a bat, flicking on lamps here and there. This pallid light pushed back the gloom and held it in tenuous abeyance. He hauled Bryan's suitcase and overnight bag in and stacked them near a dusty player piano.

"Kitchen's that way. Parlor's over there. The couch folds out into a bed. I advise against the stairs in your delicate condition. The cellar is absolutely off-limits. Phone is in the hall. Sometimes it works. No Internet, sorry."

Bryan summoned the strength to speak. "Why does the mailbox say SMITH?"

"Eh? I didn't mean this place belonged to *my* parents. Here are your crutches. Okay? Okay! Got to run. Make yourself at home."

"Wait, you're leaving? I thought—"

“Hell yes, I’m leaving. I wouldn’t stay in this creepy shithole for a million bucks. Weather is supposed to be warm tomorrow. You’ll find the garden to be the tonic to cure your ills.” Mandibole adjusted his fedora and ducked through the door. He called, “Remember, don’t go down into the cellar. The amontillado isn’t worth a broken neck.”

As the motor’s whine receded, Bryan tried to piece things together. Why had he agreed to lay up here in the boonies? He *hadn’t*, not in so many words. Life caught him in a bore tide and swept him to this peculiar shore. He thumped his way into the kitchen and wearily rummaged through the tall pine cabinets and a deep, dark pantry. Dark because the light bulb was dead. Plenty of canned goods and pilot bread. Who ate pilot bread these days? He heated tomato soup and rustled a bit of not-too-moldy cheddar and a loaf of bread from the buzzing refrigerator. The fridge was an old, decrepit model: lime green exterior, pale and fluorescent-lighted interior. Spartan other than the cheese, a bottle of murky milk, and dubious items sealed in plastic containers. There were half a dozen eggs nestled on a side rack—four cream-colored hen’s eggs, a pale blue pigeon egg, and a crusty black petrified egg. He took the lump of cheese and closed the unit, killed the pale, deathly light and the strident buzzing.

Yes, yes, soup and grilled cheese. He slumped at the kitchen table and ate every damned bite in defiance of his queasy guts. Ten minutes later, he puked onto the sixty-year-old linoleum. *Ting!* went Angie’s damned engagement ring as it rolled across the floor and into the shadows of the sink cupboards. Novocain numbness filled his mouth. He located his cell phone and tried to dial Angie. *Tried*, because the moment it powered on, the screen went into video mode and there she was on a beach blanket, taking it doggy style from an oiled dude in sunglasses and a ponytail. Bryan cursed. He stabbed impotently at the face plate until it went black.

Those movies where the emaciated, shipwrecked hero staggers along a beach, step by agonizing step? Such was Bryan’s voyage into the parlor. He collapsed onto the sofa and surrendered to a tidal surf of terrors thudding against the break-wall of his conscious mind.

The administrative secretary at Pawhunk CC called him, or maybe he imagined it. Either way: “You’re fired.”

“I’m on sick leave!”

“We don’t honor sick leave. Fired, squirrel-killer. Don’t bother cleaning out your desk. We burned your shit.”

Tom Mandibole emerged from the shadows and tiptoed across the parlor. His plastic features had altered to mimic those of Bryan’s father circa Bryan’s childhood.

Mandibole knelt in an uncannily mechanical series of motions. “If you devour the raw heart of an enemy, you gain his courage. But! If you consume his living brain, you acquire his memories. My gods, the Smiths were fusty!” He smiled and ran his wormy tongue up Bryan’s left nostril, kept wriggling deeper.

Bryan gazed in terror at an enormous black form detaching from the sun. If words were possible, he would’ve cried, *What the hell is that?* Instead, he screamed and screamed.

The house seemed much cheerier by daylight. Its crooked edges were blunted, its remnant shadows less sinister. In some respects, the place reminded him of his childhood home—Mom in her flour-dusted apron, Pastor Tallen on the step wagging his finger, and the serial puppy murders, ritual suicides, and forced sodomy. Reminded him of how Dad sometimes hid under the bed while wearing Mom’s nylon stocking over his face, and the homemade blood transfusion kit he unpacked when they played Something Scary.

Bryan managed to gain his feet after a bitter contest with the crutches, which were carved from the antlers of a stag. Their tips dug grooves in the floor as he maneuvered down the hall. His muscles ached, his head ached, and pain knifed him in the bowels. His breath gurgled and his throat constricted. His hands twitched with palsy.

Greatest blow to his vanity came from a direct, hard look into the mirror. Formerly shot with gray when left uncolored, his hair and beard were bleached white as dirty snow. Could this explain Angie’s unceremonious decampment? Had it been his hair all along? Bryan made a mental list of his symptoms and feebly attempted to correlate them with various diseases.

Epidemiology wasn't his area of expertise, and thus he could only speculate as to whether he'd contracted AIDS, syphilis, hepatitis C, or something worse. It could always be something worse. He didn't speculate for long, however. Walking from parlor to bathroom and back again taxed him to the core. The notion of peeling off his musty, sweat-sticky clothes and taking a hot shower made him want to vomit again. That reminded him: another sandwich?

Crazed, scotch-guzzling has-been author Buford Creely awaited him in the kitchen when, after hours or days had dragged past, Bryan made it there.

"You gonna die if you don't eat, kid." Creely slurred so it sounded like *eat a kid*. He wore a brown tweed jacket. His eyes were possum-red and glazed with cataracts from staring at crime scene photographs for too many years. The evil of the abyss and so forth. "Fuck it. You ate last week. We gotta do somethin' about your nerves. Gotta do somethin'. C'm'ere, squirrel-killer. You're fresh outta agency."

Bryan contemplated fleeing. He immediately lost his balance and fell. His right-hand crutch spun across the floor. He feebly brandished the other at Creely. "How did—why?" Each word was a tooth pulled with tweezers.

"Eh, your dad sent me. Your old man, remember him? Was him did all them slasher killin's back when. The Headless Horseman of Halifax. Didn't have the heart to break it to you earlier. Frank said you deserved the truth. Frank abhors a lie."

"Not Frank. Tom…"

"Who in blazes is Tom?" Creely knelt and cradled Bryan in his bony-flabby arms, lifted him to the kitchen table, and set him there. "Relax. I know what you need. Hospital didn't help, did it?"

Bryan shook his head.

"Right, you need *real* medicine. Old medicine. See, kid, you can barely move. Gotta drop some weight." Creely smiled a boozy, reassuring smile as he unbuttoned Bryan's shirt and removed it with the tenderness of a father undressing his son. "On three, roll to your left." He counted and then turned Bryan over. "That hurt?"

“Yes!” Bryan said it as more of a protest rather than an assertion of fact. The fear of further pain or, worse, humiliation provoked his anxiety. “Mr. Creely, Buford… You have to be careful. The spine is delicate.”

“Nothin’ to worry about, kid. You’re already beyond fucked. Good news is, my family learned acupuncture from the Chinese. Fix you right up, yes indeed.” The old man banged cupboard doors and rummaged through shelf drawers.

Bryan mouthed the word *acupuncture* in horror with his cheek pressed against the tablecloth. In an act of great willpower, he lifted his head and looked over his shoulder. What he saw did not prove comforting. “Are those knitting needles?”

“Stifle yourself. Hold real still.” Creely raised both arms and then hammered them downward.

The twin bolts of agony ripping through Bryan’s lower back had a psychoactive effect. He departed his body. The kitchen windows transmitted a pristine white glow. White gradually dulled to rose, then crimson, then black. The blackness absorbed him. He sailed on a cosmic breeze until a pinprick of pale white radiance flickered ahead. The flickering candle flame steadied and grew. Angie and her lover fucked on a white sand beach bordered by a black gulf of water. The man glanced at him: Mandibole wearing a shiny white shirt and a huge, cruel grin. Angie turned her head—also Mandibole’s superciliously grinning face. Bryan’s eyes popped open. Returned to the shabby, dim kitchen, he tried to scream but couldn’t suck in sufficient air.

“Huh,” Creely said. “Well, hell. Whoops, I guess.” The author’s footsteps clipped rapidly away. The front door slammed.

Blood pooled around Bryan’s hips and dripped from the edge of the table. Enough blood that he felt as if he were partially afloat in a kiddie pool. He tried to lift himself and realized the darning needles had gone clean through the small of his back and into the wood of the table. He cried.

Snow fell against the windows, and after a while, it grew dark.

Light engulfed the room and gushed into his eyes.

“Ten years! Nary a tear. But now that you’re nailed to a table, look at the waterworks. I mean, really.” Angie circled. She had dressed in white-and-black earmuffs, a white-and-black pea coat, black pants, and white Wellingtons. “What a mess, what a bloody mess. Proud to wallow in your own gore, I suppose. Really showed me, haven’t you?”

“Please help me.”

“Addition by subtraction. Are you ready for that, squirrel-killer?”

“Angie. Please.” Bryan’s right arm refused to work. He feebly pawed with his left, supplicating a goddess of torment.

“Fine. Fine, Bryan. This doesn’t mean we’re back together.” She sighed and yanked the needles free. “Oh, you asshole. This coat is ruined.”

Air, and everything else, hissed out of him.

Winter had slinked into the mountains. A warm breeze shushed through the treetops and awakened Bryan by thawing his frozen, glaciated innerscape sufficiently for a stray thought to escape the merciless grip of entropy. Pine sap, grass, and perfume tickled his nose. He opened his eyes. Angie hunkered before him, pristine but for several drops of blood on her coat and galoshes.

“You’re in a bad way,” she said.

He’d been stripped naked. From the blackened thighs down, his body resembled an unearthed Egyptian mummy, or one of the petrified corpses of climbers that adorn the slopes of Everest. His feet had ballooned and split at the joints. The nails were gone. Pus seeped. He felt absolutely nothing. Oh, inside he screamed unceasingly, but it didn’t hurt.

“Call an ambulance,” he said. *Barely* said. His lips cracked. Possibly he’d only projected the thought at her.

“Are you crazy? The ambulance drivers around here are surely not. They wouldn’t come within a mile of this creepy shithole for a million bucks. Nope, it’s home remedy or death. Worse than death, actually.”

“Ambulance,” he repeated. How shiny and plastic her hair flowed in the light like mud, how shiny and plastic her lovely face seen through a muddy

filter. Differently familiar, it provoked queasiness.

"Gangrene," she said. "On its way to your heart. My opinion is, your heart's *already* rotten. Nonetheless, I've a filial duty as your ex-fiancée. You made me call you Daddy often enough." Angie hefted a serrated cleaver. A relic from some Civil War surgeon's grim bag of atrocity tools. She poked his leg. "These have to come off. That's how you regain mobility. Give to get, sweetheart. I'll do the first, as a favor. After that, you're on your own." She set the teeth of the blade against his left thigh and began sawing. His flesh made small corkscrew piles on the floor. Only a dim tugging sensation reached his brain. He screamed anyway.

The femur cracked. Sweat dripped from the tip of her nose as she made several final strokes, gesticulating with the frenetic grace of a concert violinist. "Done!" Angie shoved the severed limb aside and wiped her brow. "Easy-peasy. You're a total dipshit with tools, I know, I know. Just… Do your best." She pressed the cleaver into his hands and, despite his cries of protest, assisted with getting a groove started. "Keep going, Bry. That gangrene will eat your innards if you fail. Ciao, stumpy."

He persisted, albeit sloppily, after she kissed his forehead and left. His hands, both of them swollen and plum dark, operated independent of his delirious mind. There was something childishly compelling about the repetitive action of sawing—almost akin to the morbid pleasure in shooting a woodland critter or dismembering a bug, except he *was* the woodland creature in this instance; he *was* the bug. Amputation would free him from the trap, this sundew house.

Plop went the right leg onto the deck. Birds twittered encouragement.

Yes, this seemed a slight improvement. He dragged himself, hand over hand, inside and through the kitchen into the parlor. His body felt light, although the journey took several days if the rotating carousel of sun and moon could be trusted as a guide. He left a red trail through the parlor and to the box television. He clicked the television on and then rested. Some kernel within his dimming soul craved information from the outside world. It yearned for even the sterile contact of cathode rays. He crawled to the couch and lifted himself onto its bleached flower-pattern cushions. The TV played in jittery black and white. Static snarled. *Davey and Goliath. The*

Muppet Show. Mr. Rogers. Lamb Chop. The actors spoke in Russian or Spanish or Slavic or the *click-click buzz* of hunting insects.

A dark-haired toddler pedaled a red tricycle into the room. The child wheeled close to the couch and stopped. His shiny hair and plastic features glowed with roly-poly good health.

"I know you," Bryan said in a perfectly clear voice. His breathing came easily. Still woozy, still full of pustulant anxiety (and pus), yet he grudgingly admitted that the compulsory mutilation had alleviated the worst symptoms of whatever disease gripped him. "Yes, you were there. I know you."

"As I know you," the child said.

"Wait. Who are you?"

"But you know. Feel better?"

"Yes. It's a miracle."

"Leeching is good for the soul. You aren't really better. Daddy said it's only temporary. You've got the gang-green."

The putrefaction of Bryan's hands had corrupted his arms to the elbows. He'd done his best to ignore this latest incursion of rot and enjoy the cartoons. Now the meddling kid had ruined everything. "What am I supposed to do? It's in my arms, for fuck's sake."

"Everything must go." The boy rolled over to the couch and handed Bryan a serrated penknife. "Daddy says to do a good job. Bye!"

The sky darkened and clotted and the windows became opaque with purple. Bryan sniffled bitter tears. He gripped the toy knife between his thumb and index finger and made the first, tiny cut. Better still.

Months oozed past. Years. Once his traitorous limb was severed, he dropped the knife and took a few breaths. Yes, better. Lighter. Addition by subtraction made increasing sense with a come-to-Jesus shock of epiphany. The next stage presented a challenge to his transcendence. Not wildly intelligent, but plenty clever, went Bryan's family motto as mumbled by drunk Dad.

He raised his remaining bicep to his mouth and bit in. Angel food cake, food of the gods.

“I am impressed. Truly.” Mandibole retrieved Bryan’s severed arms and studied them. “My grandfather trapped wolves along the Yukon. Leg-hold traps with nasty teeth. Those wolves, ah my. Rebellious critters chomped their own legs to get free. Humans really are animals with a fancy operating system, aren’t you?”

Bryan concentrated on *Sesame Street*. He frowned when Mandibole clicked the screen dead.

The man dressed in a soot-tarnished three-piece suit. His profile could have been Bryan’s father’s during his prime belt-buckle-swinging days. He clucked his tongue at the filth and grime: the holes in the ceiling, the windows melted to slag with age, mushroom beds where carpet once spread, the wasp nests, and termite-riddled beams.

“This joint sure went to seed,” Mandibole said. “Stupid me. You’re Bryan the Amazing Torso. I can hardly expect you to push a broom. You can’t even wipe your own ass. Entropy. There’s a secret to life. Entropy. Our dads are the gods of our puny universes, and yet even they are powerless beneath the cloddish tread of enervation and heat death.”

“I’m at peace.” Bryan’s belly distended with a feast of his own muscle and marrow. Perfectly sated for the coming ages and divested of humdrum, mortal concerns such as fear and happiness.

Mandibole threw back his head and laughed. His helmet hair didn’t stir, nor did his eyelashes flicker. “Not so fast, chum. Are you blind? The rot is in your chest. It’s creeping toward your brain. We must act fast, else you’re a goner. Or worse.”

Bryan waggled his stumps with bewilderment. His serenity evaporated, replaced by petulant misery. “What do you expect of me, Dad? I can’t chew my own damned throat.”

“A bit more commitment would be nice. No matter.” Mandibole leaned over and retrieved the rusty penknife. “I used to tie your shoes. In for a penny.”

“Wait,” Bryan said, too late. Despite years of accreted cynicism, he was profoundly surprised at how much blood remained, albeit momentarily, in

his body.

Mandibole finished the job by twisting Bryan's skull until it popped free. He whistled as he carried his trophy into a lush garden amok with brambles and bushes. He offered Bryan's head to the dark and ominous tree that lorded it over the smaller plants of the kingdom. The tips of its thorny branches pierced Bryan's ears and lifted him until he hung like a piece of bleeding pomegranate, a gaping manikin skull.

Constellations drifted and the sky became green. The house went under the burgeoning jungle. Heat and steam and green, endless green. The pomegranates in the great tree possessed distorted faces. The newer heads, raw and brash, could speak at first. A wrinkled and ruddy soul dangling next to Bryan said, "Ezra Tooms, goddamn you cretins! Ezra Malachi Tooms! I'm a rich man! A powerful man!"

A howler monkey descended from its leafy berth and plucked that shouting fruit-head and promptly chewed it to gushing smithereens. Such were the risks of making a scene in paradise. Not that it mattered. Sooner or later, the animal would crap, the seeds would grow, and in a hundred years or so, Mr. Tooms would again blossom on the vine, on this tree or another, sadder and infinitely wiser.

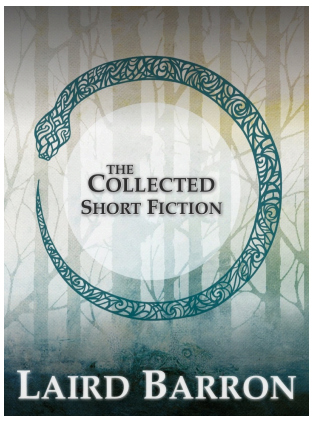
Later, as happened every epoch or two, the sun divided and a vast, Godlike hand extended with greedy eagerness. The monkeys gibbered and screamed and fled in all directions while the hand made itself a claw and tore loose swathes of canopy. Hundreds of monkeys, and squirrels, and bright-plumed birds tumbled toward the sky and became tiny silhouettes inhaled by the sticky maw of a child leaning over the colossal handlebars of his trike.

Bryan could do nothing except exult in this recurring terror. Tears of red juice trickled from his bulging eyes. He was gravid with seeds and they stifled his mindless protest. Whenever he screamed, red seeds dripped from his mouth, splattered upon the soil, and found purchase.

Over time, inconceivably deep geological time, the sentient fruit of his tree and the trees of the surrounding jungle multiplied. Each became a perfect version of himself, howling and gibbering in a mute, eternal chorus. Eventually, he grew to accept it. His multiplicities spread inexorably across the infinite and took root everywhere.

—For Michael Cisco

Andy Kaufman Creeping Through The Trees



This version taken from *Autumn Cthulhu*, 2016
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Autumn, 1998

Senior year of high school isn't the best of times. It is totally the other way. And how shall I count the ways? Cancer is eating my father alive. He's got six months, a year, it's anybody's guess. How many of those days will be worth a damn? He's sort of a tough-as-shoe-leather guy and I bet he'll make it hard on himself, on us all. Both our dogs, Little Egypt and Odysseus, bit the dust from old age during summer vacation. Not enough drama? The last week of August I almost kill myself on the new trampoline. Okay, technically, I fly off the trampoline and do a half-gainer into the side of our house. Instant KO.

Why does this even happen (and why me)? Solution: The Universe is a real bitch. Sometimes she smirks and gives you what you want. My heart's desire is a full-sized trampoline to practice cheer moves on. Well done, cosmos, you perverse whoremaster. A neighbor lost his job way up north in the Prudhoe Bay oil fields and put basically everything he owned out on the lawn at fire-sale prices. The neighbor kids cried when we loaded the trampoline into the bed of our truck. Flash forward twenty-four hours and it's me singing the blues.

I get cocky and bounce hard near the edge and *Kaboing!* Thank Satan the rhododendron bush cushions the impact. Also, thank you, dearly departed Anton LaVey, our Lord and Savior, I am alone for this debacle. None of the other girls bear witness to my humiliation. Dad has passed out drunk earlier than usual and doesn't hear the thud or the shattering china. Also kinda bad,

though. I lie stunned for a few seconds, then angry yellow jackets swarm from their nest in the bushes and sting the ever-loving hell out of me.

Neck brace, knee brace, swollen face. The knee is the worst, although sharing Renee Zellweger's squinty pout for a week is not to be envied. The upshot being one of my rivals (probably trailer park queen Reline Showalter) will lead the cheer squad when our boys pillage their way to state again. Grr! Is it too petty of me to hope the team suffers a rash of injuries and misses the playoffs?

Damn our soon-to-be ex-neighbor and his stupid discount trampoline he bought for his stupid brats. Damn the universe and all its devices, such as gravity, colorectal cancer, and children.

The mound of get-well cards is impressive. So many flowers and gift baskets, it becomes tedious to sort them for the contraband. Chocolate! Stuffed toys! Poppers (bless you Benny Three-Trees)! Porno disguised as *Cosmopolitan, Girls' Life,* and *Seventeen!* Rob Zombie and Weezer CDs!

I'm blonde, taut, and hot. Everybody loves me and everybody else hates me. I know who's who—pals write, *Hey Julie V, get well, babe;* the fools call me Julie Five, or Stuck-Up Bitch, and say, *too bad you only sprained your neck.* It's vital to know the sides. High school is a cold war no more or less a game than East versus West. Most of the girls, pro or con Julie Vellum, are super smooth and you can't go by kind words or a friendly smile. If you don't keep the factions and the alliances straight, you'll get a knife between the shoulder blades. Been there (middle school), no thanks.

Human nature; what are you going to do? After my tragic accident and the initial flood of sympathy, even my tightest friends avoid me like I'm Typhoid Mary. A knee brace or an arm cast can be sexy if you work it right. *Neck* braces, visible swelling, and contusions are totally uncool. Emotionally, I'm not well-equipped to cope, even if my upbringing suggests otherwise.

Being an only child kinda sucks when it doesn't totally rock. My shrink (Mom's idea), an ex-pill dispenser to the stars, says ugly sibling rivalries are transferred to my peers and blown up on the stage and that I should

watch it. She's right despite her ignominious status as a Beverly Hills refugee—I sharpen these claws on classmates and it's earned me a bit of a reputation for being a super-bitch. Meanwhile, Grandpa says acting snotty is a cover for weakness and it's too bad I don't have a brother to keep me in check. He seldom wears shirt or pants and handily out-drinks Dad, believe it or don't.

I take this wise counsel in stride.

Haters can talk smack all they like, I am *not* an entitled high school slut cheerleader. I am a regal and voraciously *sexual* high school cheerleader. Besides, I didn't actually do the deed until Rocky Eklund, then the backup quarterback, popped my cherry after the team took state last fall. Junior freaking year. Yeesh. Ask Robin Sloan or Indra Norse when they first gave it up. Ask those skanks, Jessica Mace and her cousin Liz Lochinvar. *I* was practically a cloistered virgin before the dam broke. Unless we're counting hand jobs and BJs. In that case, it would be fifth grade and weird, so let's not.

A week of school convinces me that I'm in a political exile. Woman without a Country. The second tier girls and hangers-on occupy my table in the cafeteria; talk about a come-down. Greetings range from nervous to frosty. Nobody looks me in the eye. Smiling the hard smile Jackie taught, I seriously worry my face will get stress fractures. I read the history of the Borgias during lunch and fantasize about a mass poisoning.

Rocky has football practice (I'm giving my beau his space; got to provide him political cover until I shed the scaggy collar) and then beers and pool at Mike Zant's house after Thursday class. Doc won't let me drive until I can turn my head again.

I catch a lift with Steely J. We have business anyhow. His ride is a Toyota wagon with Visqueen taped over the rear side windows; hundred and thirty thousand miles on the odometer. He keeps the wagon spiffy as a military bunk, oddly enough, and daisy-sweet with a cluster of air fresheners rubber-banded to the rearview. Nonetheless, I spread a handful of cafeteria napkins

on the passenger seat. My hunch says a blacklight would paint a very different picture of the environment.

Steely J resides in the friend camp. He's in the friend camp for *most* of us, not to be confused with a buddy or a pal or a member of the crew. Dude is like Australia or Switzerland; up for hijinks and not the teeniest bit judgey. He's a fixer and you don't have to like a fixer to love one. Tall, really quiet, although not broody, he-man quiet; closer to a great white shark cruising through the shallows. And white is right—he's whitey McWhite cream cheese complexioned. He walks soft, sorta hunched in his lumpy sweaters, buzz cut, black frame glasses, and sneakers for sneaking.

A man of unexpected facets, he's obsessed with ancient aliens (Greys built the Pyramids!) and a hundred and one doomsday scenarios. The universe is a hologram and the only real gods are likely horrifically evolved humanoids or giant blobs of sentient protoplasm. His father worked for a pharmaceutical company and had taken his whole weirdo family on months-long business vacations to Borneo and the Amazon Basin when the kids were little.

We've shared bizarre conversations. Craziest exchange happened after I paid him to get the test key to Math finals. Apropos of absolutely nothing (although I had the sniffles), he said, *Wonder why I never get sick?*

Not really. Fair question though. Granted, the pasty bastard isn't an exemplar of health, yet I don't recall him ever missing school from the seasonal crud.

I bleed myself.

Like Dark Ages bleeding? Smoke enemas? Barf me out, dude.

Dark Ages is recent history. Bleeding goes back to the Hellenic. In the 1920s, missionaries brought it here from South American death cults. Got to propitiate them old black gods with rivers of blood, y'know.

I'm quite sure I don't.

Bad blood out, fresh blood in. Ever want to give it a whirl, I've got the kit. Make a superwoman out of you for real.

Fresh blood in? What did that even mean? I decided I didn't give a shit. I'd let it return to haunt me at some future 3AM.

He doesn’t do sports despite his “perfect” health and even though he’d wallop most of the boys with his bizarro, predatory grace. Elmer D. said there was an incident at wrestling tryouts and Coach Grinky eighty-sixed Steely J hardcore.

Side note: I fooled around with Elmer the summer of our junior year, but have since nixed our romance. His dad wrecked their truck this past winter. Mr. D. burned and Elmer survived with some wicked scars. Pitiable or not, I pretend he doesn’t exist because now I’m rolling with Mr. Future-All-State-full-ride-to-some-powerhouse-football-town. JV be trading up.

Steely J is solid with the rich kids (especially Fat Boy Tooms). Rumor is, he gophers for them since he can pass for legal, has a boss fake ID, knows no fear, and, most importantly, is scruple-free. You want weed, booze, or heavier stuff, you call Hostettler or Benny Three Trees. You need somebody to hold for you, alibi for you, or step-’n-fetch-it, Steely J is your prole. He makes book on sports events and makes unwanted pets vanish. He’s the source for cheap designer clothes, “borrowed” power tools, scalped tickets, and VIP invites to password-at-the-door-parties. It’s this last detail that interests me at the moment.

I hit him with the lowdown. “Okay, dude, look. My dad. He has cancer.” This confession has the opposite effect from what I expected. My stomach tightens. The bile in my throat must be remorse.

“Sorry to hear it.” Steely J speaks in a monotone drawl that pitches slightly to indicate his mood. In this case, it descends toward baritone. He gives a perfunctory shit. “What kind?”

“The way he guzzles Maker’s Mark, you’d think cirrhosis, but nope. Rectal cancer.”

“Huh.”

“This is eyes-only need to know, so keep your lips zipped.”

“Not planning to do a press release. Damn.”

“Good, or it’s your balls.”

“Sure your purse has got room for ’em?”

“It’s a coin purse. Plenty of room for your junk. I need a favor.”

“Heck of a way of asking.”

“My dad’s birthday is October ninth. He loved Andy Kaufman, see. Absolutely adored him, is more to the point. Dee Dee Andersen says her brother knows a guy at the Gold Digger who saw the booking sheet for Halloween. That lounge singer character Kaufman did in the ’70s is on the schedule—”

“Tony Clifton.”

“Yes, Tony Clifton. Live and in person. What I need—”

“*The* Tony Clifton… Here, in Anchorage?” Steely J’s monotone pitches higher.

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

“Fucking A! Who’s playing him? Zmuda, I bet. Has to be Zmuda.”

“*One* of Kaufman’s buddies, obviously. That’s not the important—”

“You’d assume one of his compatriots. On the other hand, it’s possible Clifton exists. True story, Kaufman and Zmuda planned to work on a film biography of Clifton and how Kaufman originally discovered him at a hotel in Vegas and they got to be friends, and so on. Fell through because *Heartbeeps* didn’t sell enough tickets. Bummer.” He drives like turtles screw so we’ve apparently got all the time in the world.

“You should write a book.”

He doesn’t react to my sarcasm. “Comedians tap into the infinite. Black Kryptonite.”

“Fascinating, not really, but—”

“Kaufman faked his own death. Something hinky about these random gigs Clifton does. Think about that—fourteen years and he’s still dropping in to do his old routine and for what? Nobody except fogies like your dad even remember him. The whole setup is hinky. Kaufman might’ve been sick of the limelight. Fame gets some people down. *Heartbeeps* was pretty bad. Okay, it reeked. That’s why he faked his death and retired to a South Pacific island and he comes around to yank our chains every once in a while. It’s possible, right?”

“For the love of… No, J. Neither of those are possible. I can’t even.” My lips hurt, we’re way off in the weeds, and I’m about to blow a fuse. The pressure of being Julie Vellum can be crushing.

He licks his cheek. “Yeah, yeah. I know. It would be cool.”

“Please pay attention. Dee Dee says the show is a hush-hush exclusive. One night only. There’s a secret list. I want Daddy on that list.”

He smiles. His incisor is silver. The smile doesn’t change his expression much more than a lone cloud moving across the sky. “Clifton rules. Best character Kaufman ever did, easy. I’ll make some calls, see if it’s legit.”

“Super. What’s it gonna set me back?”

He flicks a glance my way. His tongue protrudes again, tasting the possibilities. “I dunno. BJ?”

I tap the brace that ratchets my neck and chin so severely it might as well be one of those Elizabethan collars the vet puts on a dog. My eyes and nose are still swollen and my lips are fat enough I’m still taking vital nutrients through a straw. “You probably play the lottery, too. C’mon, dude. I’m in no condition. *You’re* in no condition. Blowing you is against the Geneva Convention.”

“Well, you look like a walking glory hole. Fifty bucks. Plus whatever the tickets go for, if this is legit.” Fifty bucks is his asking price for everything from shoplifting eyeliner, to scoring tickets, to committing grand larceny or felonious assault.

“Deal!” I almost shake his pallid, sweaty paw before I come to my senses. His parents own a place on the hillside. Didn’t mom and dad J relocate to the Midwest in ’95 and basically abandon the property? Rings a bell. He’s got a litter of younger siblings. Pale, snot-nosed ankle-biters who look like they should be floating in jars of formaldehyde. Did his family abandon him? You can attend public school until the age of twenty-one. I think he’s close. Does he sleep in his car? In the trunk (a coffin)? Is he communicable? He wears the same sweater several days in a row. Dirt under his nails is a given. Drops of blood crust the toes of his sneakers. His favorite all-weather ensemble is a Seahawks track suit, plus a goose down parka when the mercury dips. He smells ripe and his cheap aftershave is insufficient to the challenge. He habitually sips I don’t have a clue what from a mason jar jammed inside a grody Starbucks cup holder. His breath is raw as fuck. He appears pudgy unless you’ve been around ball players and weightlifters and recognize there’s earth-moving brawn under the panda-

bear-softness. Why do his eyes make me think of fish? I consider these mysteries for half a second and we're home sweet home.

Steely J says as I open the car door, "Ever have an imaginary friend? When you were a kid?"

"Jesus," I say.

Mom insists I call her Jackie. It's a Unitarian thing, maybe? She and Dad lived in California right out of high school. Jackie got knocked up, then she got religion. She was too busy giving birth to me to finish college. By the time I entered Kindergarten, she'd ditched the whole stay-at-home-mom routine (bailed on the church, too), took a few night classes in business, and embarked on a career as a hotshot saleswoman of water purification systems.

Dad couldn't hack UCLA no matter how he tried. He slunk home to Girdwood, Alaska, in defeat. Grandpa gave him a superintendent job at the chemical plant in Anchorage. Dad's name is Jeff. He doesn't let me call him Jeff; he's not a Unitarian and the Valley didn't rub off on him. Mom, I mean, Jackie, got the full dose and passed it along to me.

Jackie travels the globe. She stays on the road two weeks out of every month. She's an absentee parent, which makes her pretty damned rad. Sure, it blew chunks (and to whom it may concern, I don't suffer from bulimia; my athletic figure is purely genetic) during pre-adolescence not having a mom to teach me how to navigate middle school and getting my period and so forth. Past is the past (Grandpa says it's prologue). I've come to appreciate the combined arms power of benign neglect and guilt. Besides, when she is around, she displays the demeanor of an indulgent queen dishing boons willy-nilly. Boys? *Just be careful, dear. Here's a variety pack of condoms.* Money? *Let's tack another twenty onto your allowance*. Out late? *Be home by dawn.* Can I have a car for my sweet sixteen? *Tell your father to take you to the dealership. Nothing too fast, okay?* Best part is, once I grew tits I magically became eligible for her Machiavellian advice, which she dispenses freely.

Fun and games notwithstanding, there is a single ironclad rule. On my first morning as a freshman at Onager High, Jackie drove me to the front entrance and we sat in the car bopping to “Black Hole Sun” and verifying our makeup. A dark-haired girl in a leather jacket, jeans, and combat boots got out of a stone age Ford truck.

Jackie grabbed my arm real hard and said in a witchy, hateful voice that surely belonged to someone else’s mom, *See that little twat dressed like a Jet? That’s Jessica Mace. Her bitch mother is Lucius. Redneck losers. Stay away from them or you’ll be sorry.*

I didn’t have the slightest clue as to her damage (and the fact a lot of people consider *us* to be barely one step out of the trailer park made me wonder if dear old ma was projecting). My arm hurt with those talons squeezing tight. Why the drama? Yeah, I could tell the Mace chick was trouble from the way she stood, all badass nonchalant with her mouth crimped like Lee Van Cleef, or somebody who carried a switchblade. Still, I could handle it. *Jeez, Jackie. Get real. I’m not scared of redneck trash.*

Fear me, *then.*

What? I’m not scared of you either.

Pow! Jackie backhanded me and smashed my lip. Prior to that shocking moment, she’d never lifted a finger to check my antics. Dad did the discipline in our house. I sat there in shock while she dabbed the blood with a hanky and straightened my hair.

We’re copacetic? She smiled, gangster-hard. Nobody ever really knew her, or this is why Dad drinks.

I swallowed my tears and bailed. Had to slink past Mace loitering on the sidewalk. The girl appraised me with narrowed eyes and a smirk.

You’ve got something on your face.

Jackie needn’t have worried. I hated Mace already.

Three years on and we haven’t revisited the topic. Everything seems rosy between mother-dearest and me. Jackie may be less creepy than Steely J, however that doesn’t make it easier to read her. She is, after all, the one who assigned *The Prince* as bedside reading. *Smile, then stick it to them, honey.*

Instead of wrist-wrist, elbow-elbow, it's smile-smile, stab-stab. It is totally better to be feared than loved.

She recently returned from a trip to the Midwest, hell-bent as ever on expanding her empire conference by grueling conference. I haven't told her of my plan to surprise Dad with Tony Clifton tickets. Maybe I will, when I get some more courage. Since Dad got diagnosed with the big C, she acts as if she almost loves him again. Freaks me the hell out.

Dad's on a permanent vacation from the plant. He drinks more than ever. Surrounds himself with cartons of Natty Light and Maker's Mark and slouches in the den in the dark watching horror flicks with the sound low on his pride and joy RCA box—he doesn't need the volume; he knows the script by heart and mutters his lines with the embittered diligence of a failed actor. He surfaces for dinner that Jackie or I cook (defrost). Sits at the head of the table (at least two beer cans or a whiskey next to his plate) with a drowning man's grin and asks how our day went. Doesn't slur, although he speaks slowly and his eyes are bloodshot.

Today, he's absorbed in the *Montel Williams Show* and oblivious to me limping past on the way to my bedroom. Bunko, the grizzled tomcat, follows at my heel, same as he always does. Jackie feeds Bunko, Dad kicks him, and *I* pet him and give him love. He's as close to a brother as it's going to get around here.

By the way, the reason I'm an only child is Jackie had two miscarriages and an abortion before she gave birth to breech-baby me. According to her, she'd argued with Dad about whether to keep me at all. I'm not sure which of them was pro or con Julie. My foes say she conceived me in the backseat of Dad's jalopy and that she kept me to keep him leashed. For the record, she doesn't deny it.

Reflecting on grade school, I realize how lonely our home was due to Mom's relentless travel schedule. Dad let me stay up late and watch *Taxi* reruns with him when she was away. Sloppy Joes, Tang, and an ice cream sandwich for dinner on a TV tray on the couch in my Cabbage Patch Kids PJs. Movie of the week or a western or some stand-up comedy from his stack of VHS tapes. I'm not exaggerating—he loved Kaufman, and Robin Williams, and Bill Hicks (grooved on horror by Lewton, Carpenter, and

Romero, but decided I was too young to go that heavy). The rough stuff did it for him—brutal satire and white man madness fumed from those comedians. Except for the profanity, most of it went over my head. No worries; those were the rare occasions that I got to be Daddy's little girl instead of a piece of furniture.

He cried his eyes out the day after Kaufman passed away. Drank himself into a stupor in honor of Hicks a decade later. Dad didn't shed tears over Hicks, though. I'm not sure he had any left after 1984.

Whatever our problems, he's my dad and he's dying and I have to believe it's a signal from the universe that Dee Dee Andersen told me about Clifton's forthcoming surprise appearance. I'm infamous for deviousness not imagination. Until this opportunity, I haven't thought of a single meaningful gesture to show Dad I care the way a daughter is supposed to care (even though my heart feels kind of numb). I'm selfish and big enough to admit the failing.

I lie in bed and crank the Matthew Good Band. I do a couple poppers and hope they can help sort out some of this bullshit. My prayer is, *Save the day, Steely J, you weird, weird dude.* Bunko nuzzles under my jaw, where the brace seam is snuggest, and purrs. He loves the shit out of my cone of shame.

Rocky calls on my rhinestone-studded telephone in the wee hours after Dad has fallen asleep in front of the TV and Jackie disappears into her bedroom lair downstairs to consult spreadsheets and headshots. Rocky's favorite topics are football and his Iroc-Z in no particular order. Tonight is more of the same. Eventually he remembers to ask how I'm doing. Am I already an afterthought? Did he call so late because he took one of my many, many rivals on a cruise of the Eklutna Flats in his damned midnight-blue Iroc-Z? Time for another popper. Bingo-bongo, better.

Rocky says, "I ran into your pal, Steely J, at the store. Freaky you should ask him to score Clifton tickets. You and him are Kaufman nuts?"

"Hey, now. I wouldn't exactly say I'm a nut—"

"Fucker gives me the willies."

“Steely J isn’t for everyone. Still, where would you get your discount ’roids without him?”

“I meant Kaufman.”

“Kaufman’s definitely not for everyone either,” I say. “You’re in luck, considering the fact he’s dead as a doornail, Jim. Supposedly, haha.”

“He was evil.”

“How evil was he?”

“Caveman in a cave raping all the cavewomen evil. Freeze frame his face next time you watch one a his old shows. Pure, violent malevolence.” Rocky breathes heavily, the way he does after a hard practice or a screw-session in his Iroc-Z. “The others have other ones. These celebrity haunts. Jim Morrison. Jim Belushi. Freddy Mercury. Bette Davis. Charlie Chapman. Gilda Radner. Marilyn Monroe. Elvis.”

“Uh, baby? Is this a joke?” I’m losing my pleasant buzz with a quickness. Rocky isn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer. I would not have guessed “malevolence” is within a million miles of his vocabulary. His jokes concern bodily functions and referring to his rivals as faggots. If this isn’t a joke, I’m not sure I want to know what it is.

“Stifle yourself and listen. There’s an entry with a roster in the black almanac, but I haven’t read it, and maybe it’s a lie. I knew one unlucky kid who claimed visitations from Peter Lorre. Makes my blood run cold and mine is bad enough. Sometimes I see Andy Kaufman creeping through the trees outside our house. He shows himself when something awful is on the way.”

“Uh, you see Andy Kaufman. Lurking. Am I hearing you right?”

“You’re hearing me right. Months go by and nothing, then poof! He’s every-damned-where. Follows me home from school and stands under my window and grins. Winks at me through the stacks at the library. I know he’s real because I’ve seen his tracks and because it’s happened to members of my family going back generations. How far? How deep? Deep as a snake, black-slipping into its hole? Is it just entertainers? Maybe it’s all sorts of dead famous people. Did the pale visage of George Washington vex my child grandfather as he huddled with his Boy Scout troop around the

fire? Did Ben Franklin meet the Bard on some lonely deer path in Virginia? The way Franklin doped and drank and forswore a Christian deity, I bet it is so."

Visage? Vex? This is pod person talk. Has my boyfriend had a brain transplant? I let the silence stretch. "Rocky, have you been hitting the nitrous again? You sound totally fucked up."

"I'm high on plasma. Speaking of fucking. To be honest, babe, I *had* to get my rocks off. Today was a real stressor. I drove Reline to the flats and banged her like a drum. Didn't mean anything. She's a skank. I double-wrapped my junk." He waits for me to respond; I don't because my heart is a lump of ice in my throat. He eventually goes on, "Don't be pissed. You are, aren't you? I get it. I was disgusted with what I'd done and I thought about capping her on the spot, just crack her open and dump the whole mess into the bay. I've done it before. Usually I stick to dogs because nobody misses them. Nobody makes a federal case over a dead animal. You still there?" Rocky laughs and it's not his laugh, it changes. Steely J says, "Sorry, JV. Just messing with you. I've got a natural talent for mimicry."

"Holy shit, you asshole. Be sure to put that in as your yearbook quote. *A natural talent for being a douche*." I can't tell if I'm having a heart attack. Bunko wakes from whatever cats dream of and his fur puffs. He yowls, swipes a claw at my phone-hand, and leaps from the bed.

Steely J laughs again and says in a not-quite perfect imitation of Rocky, "For the record, your boyfriend is a schmuck. Two to one he *is* taking a cruise with Reline as we speak. Probably imagines he's spiking a puppy instead of a football whenever he scores a TD. It's in those beady eyes. What I said about Kaufman is also true. He really started coming around my place one dark autumn. For my dad it was James Dean. I'll tell you the whole story later."

He hangs up before I can answer with a stream of profanity. Amazement overcomes my immediate anger. Got to hand it to the freak—it's an epic prank. I laugh it off like I'm supposed to. Not so deep down, I wish there was someone like a friend to call and unburden myself.

I ditch the neck brace and my lips finally deflate to regulation air pressure. Better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick (one of granddad's top five apothems), although the way my luck is running, the pointy end of a stick might have my name on it.

After a week with no contact, I track Steely J to the school stadium. It's lunch period. He's hanging with Jessica Mace on the football stadium bleachers. Surprising, given their history of mutual animosity. During seventh grade, he snapped her bra strap on a dare from Nolan Culpepper. Mace clobbered Steely J with a bicycle pump. Thirty stitches and no truce. Yet here they are, thick as thieves. Like I said: high school is global politics in microcosm. Factions are ever-shifting ice sheets, calving, drifting, merging.

Mace rises with languid insolence and blocks the path. She wears a faded shirt that reads ANCHORAGE WOLVERINES ROLLER DERBY SQUAD 1978. Her mom's blood is still spackled in the fiber. Lucius Lochinvar (her maiden name) had skated under the handle Scara Fawcett. A goon. Jackie knew her, even back then—whatever happened with them led to a twenty-year feud. Violence is my bet. Thuggishness seems to be a Lochinvar-Mace trait.

Down on the field, my girls of Raven Squad are drilling—*Raven Power! Let's go, Ravens, Let's Go! Raaa-ven Power! Juke To The Left, Juke To The Right! Beat Em Up, Beat Em Off, Fight-Fight-Fight! Raven Power! Raven Power! Rat Shit, Bat Shit, Yay Team!* Something along those lines.

"Hey Julie Five. How's tricks?" Mace smiles, and like Steely J, it means less or more or worse than you'd think it does. She may as well have a storm cloud boiling overhead. Her eyes are fierce. Eyes of a drunk or a woman who just had angry sex. Her fighting rings glint—three on the left, two on the right. The death's head could crack a bone.

My inclination is to smack her with my crutch. I rein in the impulse.

She puts her hands on her hips. "Julie, you're a cooz and I'm calling you out."

"What's up your ass?"

"Elmer's a dear personal friend of mine. You kicked him to the curb. Broke his heart. I'm going to do unto you by breaking your face."

“Think so?”

“Know so.”

“Isn’t this is a teensy bit out of the blue?”

“Been on my honey-do-list for a while.”

I flash a sneer to cover the fact my knees are knocking. “Real brave picking a fight with a girl halfway in traction.”

“Don’t worry, sweetie. I like cold dishes. This’ll wait until that chicken leg is out of the brace. Just be sure to keep your veterinarian on speed-dial. You’re gonna require his services.”

“Fuck you in the ear,” is my witty rejoinder as I squeeze by.

Mace chuckles and sticks a cigarette into the corner of her mouth. “Save the date, bitch.”

Steely J sits on a bench, filming the cheer squad with a handheld movie camera. He doesn’t glance at me as I collapse beside him. “Jessica M. is in a bad mood. Might want to avoid her.” His lips barely move. He did a ventriloquist routine at the school talent show once. His dummy had lacked a lower jaw and its sundress costume was rotten with mold. He’d called her Veronica. Have I mentioned Steely J is an odd duck?

“Nice, thanks. What are you doing, perv?”

“Picking out victims.”

“Hello?”

“Annual sacrifice to the death gods is nigh. If I’m gonna be the American Fulci, got to get my hands bloody.”

“Sick. Start with Showalter. You could be right and the twat is gunning for my spot at the head of the squad.”

“Only a virgin sacrifice will do.”

“The death gods are going to starve around here, I guess.”

“Sometimes terror is enough. Put on the mask of the dark of the moon and wander the earth.”

“Damn, Steely, you say some loco bullshit. Ought to hang with the Goth kids. They’d love your shtick.”

“I’m too edgy. The Goths don’t feel me.”

“Go figure. Anything on those tickets? You’re supposed to be hooking me up. You gonna come through, or is your rep bullshit?”

He sets the camera in his lap. “Meant to tell you, I checked with my sources. Clifton isn’t on the schedule.”

“Dee Dee swears he is.”

“Dee Dee got suckered by secondhand info. It’s smoke. Somebody probably thought it’d be a great joke to start the rumor. Classic Kaufman.”

I close my eyes and imagine the last time I kissed Rocky. Two days before the trampoline debacle. We’ve fucked thirty or forty times and it’s okay, although I never come. Is it me, or is my stud merely adequate? A busload of other girls would love to double-check my findings and that’s why I don’t complain. I imagine tripping Mace down the concrete staircase on the other side of the cafeteria. I’ve only seen her cry once after her brother was in a car accident. The memory of her ugly tears keeps me warm on long arctic nights.

Steely J says, “There’s another possibility. We could get creative. Do some community theater. My audition was convincing, right?”

“This a “creative” way to separate me from fifty bucks?”

“*One hundred* bucks.”

“Where the hell am I going to get a hundred dollars?”

He mimes sucking a cock. “Seriously, though. I’ll need a week or two to rehearse. Perfect the delivery.”

“Rehearse? Rehearse what?”

“A command performance.”

“How come you’re so great at imitating voices?”

“Told you—it’s natural talent. I meditate at night. Sit in the middle of my room and open my mind to the cosmos. All kinds of shit is floating around in the dark. Seeps into us every minute of the day. I just figured a way to make it happen faster.”

“Anybody can meditate.”

His expression slackens by one or two turns of a screw. His pupils expand. Funny how a millimeter or two can change someone's face so dramatically. "See, I'm really into it now. Used to take all night in full lotus. I can slip sideways at will." He wriggles his tongue and says in a Don Pardo voice: "Would you care to hear my idea?"

"I'm all ears." A glib pronouncement that belies serious misgivings regarding my deepening association with Steely J, Man of a Thousand Voices. I should have obeyed my instinct to tell him to piss up a rope.

Diehard leaves in the birch trees turn yellow and drop after a real cold snap toward the end of September. A few minutes past six and dark. I'm pacing in front of the window, nervous as a freshman awaiting her prom date. Hilariously, Jackie and Dad figure from the way I'm behaving Rocky is going to pop the question. Dad has spent a significant portion of the afternoon sharpening a Bowie Knife from the display case in the basement. He's only half drunk. There's an ominous portent for you. Jackie warms him a TV dinner. The gusto with which he attacks his Salisbury steak confirms he'll adjust to his inevitable group home environment with aplomb.

Steely J's car parks with one tire on the curb. Even though he'd warned me, I'm jarred by his radical transformation from oafish, pervy teenager to the hulking schlub in the Vegas lounge singer suit who strolls up the walkway. Middle-aged, pale, bad toupee, worse skin, tinted glasses, ruffled shirt and bowtie, gut overhanging his belt, disco pants, and scuffed loafers. He carries a case sheathed in red velvet in his left hand. The change wouldn't be more complete if he'd transformed into a werewolf.

I open the front door and do a double-take. It's really Tony Clifton, or at least someone who resembles Clifton. No way, no freaking way—Steely J has to be under there somewhere, right? Unless he's paid one of his pals to act as an accomplice and *really* sell the gag. He knows everybody and one of them could be a frustrated actor.

"J, is it you?" I whisper as he grips my fingers near the tips and gives them a shake the way you do with a toddler.

“Tony C, baby. Tony C plays live.” His accent is nasally and he smells like he took a bath in Aqua Velva. I still can’t decide. “Course, you’ve invited me in, I can return anytime I wanna.” He says it deadpan.

Jackie comes around the corner. Her stare wavers between bewilderment and horrified recognition. Mommy dearest is a control freak. She dislikes the unexpected. “Who is this, dear?” That stilted tone reminds me of the time she slapped my mouth. She’s wearing a red blouse and a black skirt and the shoes she won’t be caught dead in away from the house. I also know she knows Tony Clifton from her conversations with Dad over the years. I hate it when she plays coy. She truly does take Machiavelli to heart.

Steely J winks. “Hi, toots. Be a doll and fix me a drink, will ya.”

Before she can yell at him, I tell her it’s Dad’s big surprise. Step aside and let the magic happen, Mom! She frowns and departs for the kitchen to mix a tray-load of cocktails. Monday is Caribou Lou night at the Vellum casa. Steely J, or whoever the fuck, ambles after me into the den and there’s Dad slumped on his La-Z-Boy throne, a yellow Husqvarna ball cap tilted back. Blue light from the oversized TV screen glints in his eye as he regards the spectacle of Steely J unpacking a karaoke box and microphone.

After a few minutes of strained silence, Dad gestures at me with his knife. His expression is similar to Mom’s. Expectant with dread and willfully ignorant. “Honey, what the Sam Hill is going on?”

I take his free hand and say in a well-honed baby-girl voice, “Daddy, a friend of mine heard you’re a major fan of Tony Clifton. Tony’s in town for a couple of nights and—”

“Don’t bore your old man to death, sweetheart,” Steely J says and the accent slips. However, his patronizing contempt is one hundred percent authentic Clifton. “You’re giving me an earache. Where’s my highball?” He snags a glass from Jackie’s tray as she edges by and swats her ass hard enough to make her bunny hop.

I’m astonished. A) the jerk has the nerve, and B) my mom blushes and keeps stepping as if she’s a cocktail waitress pulling a shift in a 1960s club. What the fuck, over?

My heart flutters—Dad will blow sky-high; aggression and territorial pissing are hardwired into him. Instead, he smirks and a trapdoor opens in

the collage of my memories of childhood. Sure, I'm used to their civil antipathy. Nonetheless, there's a rawness to Dad's smile; his hatred is laid bare. Things with them are more complicated and bitter than I'd dared to imagine.

Steely J leans over and his pants ride his crack. He switches on the sound. After a burst of feedback piano keys tinkle, building. "All right, all right, everybody park your caboose so's I can get this show on the road. I can't stay here all evening, I got a gig in Anchorage. My manager lined up this charity crap or else I'd be at the Gold Digger squeezing pole dancer titties and drinking real booze. You know it, cousin."

Dad guffaws. "Gimme some Pat Boone."

"Shuddup, wiseacre. I'll sing what I wanna sing." Steely J clears his throat. "As it happens, I wanna do a number by Pat B." He proceeds to sing, or kind of sing, "Speedy Gonzalez," including the cartoonish bridges by Speedy and his put-upon wife. Visualize, if you will, a flat affect teen mimicking a dead comedian imitating a middle-aged crooner who enunciates through his nose imitating a faux Spanish accent and fucking the lyrics over just enough to sprain your brain, and you get the picture.

"Sweet baby Jesus, what am I hearing?" Jackie mutters through her clenched teeth. She grips my elbow while smiling to shame a constipated beauty queen. "Who is this idiot?"

I return the grin with interest. "Tony Clifton, Ma. None other. Look how happy Daddy is."

"Speedy Gonzalez" wraps. The lull segues into an instrumental. Steely J huffs and puffs. Sweat makes tracks in his makeup. He sips the highball and nods at Dad. "Alaska, huh? Land of the Midnight Sun. Where men are men and so are the women. That wife of yours, buddy. Whadda ya do? Kidnap a mountain goat and slap a dress on it? Lady, another round and keep 'em coming." He hands Jackie (who looks like she's chewing tenpenny nails) his empty as the intro for "Green, Green Grass of Home" kicks in.

At this point, I'm naïve enough to hope it's going to be a success. Alas, during the instrumental, Steely J says to my dad, "Last time I did a charity set, it was at a children's ward. Cue-ball central. Really pathetic, I tell ya. Now, you look pretty good for a guy with the big C. Really good, really

vibrant. Can't tell what's under your hat. Looks like a full head a hair. You got some meat on your bones. Got a nice gut goin', hey? Dunno, maybe beer has cancer-retarding qualities and that's why your hair hasn't all fallen out yet. Cancer of the ass, right?"

"Jeff isn't on chemotherapy," Jackie says coldly. She directs a withering glance at me. "Julie, I don't know who this… lout is, or if he's a friend, of yours, but I've had quite enough—"

Steely J snickers and waves dismissively. "'Quite enough?' Way you stomp around the house in your fuck-me pumps, you ain't had *any* in a while. Amirite, Jeff? Cancer of the asshole does take a man's zest for life out of the equation. How you supposed to concentrate on shtupping the missus when you're distracted by a burning ring of fire?"

"Oh my." I cover a horrified smile with my hand. I can smell the brimstone. The roof is sure to collapse and bury us alive any second. Such is my desperate plea to a non-existent god, at any rate. Dad and Jackie appear dumbfounded.

"Christ almighty, I'm thirsty." Steely J tosses the mike and does his penguin-strut out of the den.

"He has to leave. Immediately!" This from Jackie. She grips a shelf for support. Weakened and shocked, she'll assume her ultimate form in a minute, I have no doubt.

"Mom—"

"Fine! I'm calling the police!" Strength returning. Rage will do the job.

"Overkill, Mom. Overkill."

"No, that's it. I'm calling 911."

"Mom, Jackie, what do you want the cops to do?"

"What do I want? What do I want! I *want* him to take his crappy karaoke box and get the hell away from us!"

"I'm gonna stab him," Dad says thoughtfully. He hasn't moved, and his expression is sort of dopey rather than furious, but he's white-knuckling the Bowie knife. "Jackie, I don't like how he's talking. I'm gonna slice his neck."

I tell them to cool their jets and stay put for the love of god. I go after Steely J. He's not in the upper living room or the kitchen. I'd run through the back door if I were in his shoes. Not the dude's style. His car remains parked on the street. He's the sort to hang his head and absorb whatever verbal or physical punishment is dished at him. At the moment, it's the physical punishment that Dad will inflict that has me worried.

The door to the half bath is wide and there's Steely J on all-fours, head dipped into the toilet. His foot twitches as he gurgles and laps with the rabid gusto of a hound attacking his favorite bowl.

I kind of scream and he shudders and gazes over his shoulder, water dripping from his askew fake mustache.

"Yeah?" He says in a voice I haven't heard before this moment. It isn't Tony Clifton's and it isn't quite his own.

"My parents are straight tripping. Holy shit. Get your ass out before Dad stabs you or my mom calls in SWAT." I'm convinced he's got to go for several reason. Imminent injury will suffice. "Are you… Are drinking that?"

He paws his smeary lips and cracks his neck. "I'm due a commission." Almost in character, although his pancake makeup is ruined.

"Please, dude. I'll catch you with the dough later."

"Fine. Pay Steely J." He rises unsteadily. His bulk crowds the whole bathroom. The front of his suit is soaked.

"Just beat it before I hurl." Well, too late on that count.

I expect a mushroom cloud and nuclear fallout. Instead, Jackie tiptoes through the house with a sheepish expression. We mumble weather-related factoids. Dad continues to marinate. I hobble around campus and grit my perfect teeth (thank you, retainer manufacturing company!) when I hand Steely J his hundred bucks. He's cool; just counts his money and walks away like nothing.

I tell the adventure to Rocky Friday night after a hot and heavy session on the Eklutna Flats. The neck brace is history and I'm looking fly, so we're on

again. It’s cold and he lets the engine idle. Stars are embedded in the steamy glass. Every passing set of headlights on the highway illuminates the interior of the Iroc with a spangled glow.

“Toilet water?” Rocky says. “Sounds like a laugh riot. Bet your parents lost their shit. Eric Michaels told me Steely J’s Dad and Zane Tooms’s parents are asshole buddies with a whole slew of Chinese investors. They fund illegal hunting expeditions in Africa and Siberia to snuff endangered animals and drive up the prices of sex drugs and diet pills. The Asians think powdered rhino horn will get their shit hard. Anyway, these guys are betting that once a bunch of animals go extinct, their market share is gonna pay big bucks. Pretty cold, huh?”

I agree it’s pretty cold.

“I hope you didn’t pay for the Steely J con.”

“What else was I going to do?”

“Tell him to blow it out his ass. You owe him dick.”

“Nobody crosses Steely J on a debt.”

“Yeah, but the punk didn’t come through as promised. No deal.”

“I don’t know, Rock. He came to the house and did his routine. Technically, we’re the ones who pulled the plug—”

“Screw that noise.” His hair is mussed and sweaty. His shirt is unbuttoned. He reeks of me. He sets his jaw with gung-ho stubbornness. “What’s going to happen is, you’re receiving a refund. Right now. We’ll roll up to his pad and get him with the program.”

I don’t bother to argue. Rocky has the brains of the aforementioned blood-crazed rhino and there’s no point. “It’ll keep until tomorrow. How about we go another round, champ?”

“Another round.” He glances at his crotch with a flicker of doubt.

“Ding-ding.”

And that’s how I start along a path that teaches me there are worse things than calamitous domestic scenes or getting accidentally knocked up.

Rocky cruises by my place the following afternoon. Mike Zant idles behind him on Mike's dad's Kawasaki motorcycle. Mike is varsity fullback, totally hot, and a lunkhead among lunkheads—exactly the type of goon you bring along when you're planning something stupid. Rocky dares not approach the front step (he is familiar with Dad and Dad's knife). He honks until I get it together and walk over to see what he wants. He tells me to hop in. After some back and forth, I do.

And we're off to see Steely J with intentions of malice. I spend the next twenty minutes half-heartedly trying to convince Rocky this is a bad idea. I stole the hundred dollars from Jackie's sock drawer, she doesn't miss it, and so on. Nothing doing. He clenches his jaw and presses harder on the gas. Eventually I hunker in my seat and get quiet. Lots of hairpin turns on the road up the mountain to the house of J. Lunkhead Mike won't wear a helmet over his majestic afro. The way he's laying the bike over on curves trying to match Rocky's pace, I'm worried he'll miss one and crash among the spruce.

Much as I protest against this trip, the cruel bitch inside of me hopes Rocky and Mike have to slap Steely J around. He embarrassed me in front of my parents and I'd love to have the money I stole from Jackie back in my hot little hand; there's a shoe sale on at the Dimond Center Mall in Anchorage.

The house lurks at the end of a steep drive (rutted and broken pavement), eighty or ninety feet off the main road. Funky shake roof and siding peel from the house. It might have been tits a decade ago, but the place is going to hell fast. Mother Nature rules Alaska. Lower floor is a daylight basement wedged into the hillside. Cruddy, brown-yellow curtains are drawn. Trees everywhere. Last mailbox I noticed is a mile back, at least. Steely J's Toyota is angled next to a state trooper cruiser on blocks. The cruiser may have been in a fire. Smashed in windows and busted light bar. Nearby, a rotting doghouse, but no dog. Reminds me how much I miss mine. Spruce branches, shorn by the last few windstorms, lie tangled in the dead grass. A raven perches on a splintered, disconnected telephone pole and gives me a knowing eye.

I pretend the hood of the Iroc is a piano and lounge atop it (awkwardly) while Rocky and Mike move up the driveway, climb a flight of rickety stairs, and knock on the front door. The door opens and they step inside.

The door closes. It's much cooler here. Sunlight slants through the canopy, feeble as a candle in a huge, wrecked mossy cathedral vault. Too chilly. I huddle in the car for a while. Problem is, Rocky took the keys and now my feet are totally freezing. Worse, no tunes.

This drags along for an unbearable while until Dee Dee's number beeps on my cell phone. Bored and vengeful I answer. Just the twat I want to ream. She asks if my Dad enjoyed the show at the Gold Digger and I tell her to cram it where the sun don't shine. She's genuinely taken aback—*Say what? Why you trippin'?* and like that. I thank her for the false info, and ruining my Dad's birthday, fuck you very much.

"Whoa-whoa—I didn't feed you any bullshit."

"You said your pal was in the know about Clifton. Only the guy was never scheduled to appear. Nice, real nice."

"Julie, Julie, calm down. I told you, it was a private show. Clifton played—10PM sharp. My parents went. Dude's an asshole. Everybody loved it. Dad got an autographed photo. You're really spun, girl."

I tell her to blow a goat and end the call. Oh, dear dog, my wrath toward Steely cocksucker J has reached a crescendo. Murder is a possibility. The conniving bastard failed to secure tickets and concocted the whole performance to cover himself and charge me double. Fuming and plotting, I glance toward the house and notice the door has swung open again.

Somebody yells my name. The muffled cry doesn't repeat and leaves me guessing. My imagination runs wild—Steely J's fat face getting knocked in by Mike's fist; Steely J's nads getting kicked around like a hacky sack. This is a pleasing fantasy, except… What if the boys go too far? What if they beat him to a pulp and forget to collect the loot? This situation practically begs for a woman's touch.

My knee is better every day. Rage makes a beautiful painkiller. I ascend the grade and climb the steps with less difficulty than I'd feared. Gets my heartrate going is all. Gawd, the house, though. Steely J carved something, maybe a crescent moon, into the wooden door panel. Inside, Lemon Pledge partially masks an underlying dankness. I wander around a dim maze. None of the light switches work. Doors are nailed shut except to the kitchen and a half bathroom. Both rooms are Spartan and neat. Reminds me of his car.

Anger deserts me the way sweat evaporates and leaves me clammy and flustered. Why would a person nail doors shut inside his home? Why haven't I heard any commotion? Why don't I call to Rocky and Mike? To this last, I can only say that the last thing a person does when exploring a semi-abandoned building is draw attention to one's self. It's a survival trait culled from inhaling enough slasher flicks. No fucking in an empty room and no calling out, *anybody there?* as you sneak around in your Nancy Drew shoes.

Thump-thump-thump goes my rubber-tipped crutch on floorboards in a long hall. I instantly notice the lack of photos, paintings, or any form of decoration. Shit ain't right. At the end of the hall are stairs heading down into the basement. Of course, I hear Rocky's voice. He chuckles and so does someone else.

I get to the bottom of the steps and push through a heavy rubber sheet. Okay, creepy. The basement is a box and it's hot as a greenhouse. Afternoon light dribbles in at the edges of the curtains and there's a desk lamp glowing from a distant corner. TV monitor with the sound muted. Comedians are performing. A rich, earthy reek gets into my nose and gags me. Fertilizer, shit, dead leaves, wet copper, and green growing things. A squirmy smell. The J family used to summer in the Amazon. They brought some with, apparently.

Furniture is totally Steely J. An aquarium, or terrarium, not sure which, except it's economy sized. Two hundred gallons or more, pushed against the far wall. Racks of the sort you find in hospitals are positioned opposite one another and strung with IV tubes and baggies of what surely must be blood and other, clearer stuff. I've seen plasma; it's plasma. Wonderful.

Rocky squats in an inflatable pool near the terrarium. He doesn't acknowledge my appearance. He's in a zone. His jacket is unbuttoned. He's not wearing a shirt or pants. I linger on this image: Shirtless. Pantless. Unbuttoned jacket. Squatting in a kiddie pool of water. An object sticks to his breastbone. Fat as a big old rubbery turd from a novelty catalog. Grayish-brownish-black, and shiny-slick. Attached at his left nipple, it trails to his belly. Vaguely familiar, possibly a specimen I've seen in Mr. Navarro's biology class. My poor brain will catch up real soon. The lighting

is bad, but the passing seconds improve my vision and I'm sorry. More crescent moons are spray-painted in white on the curtains and the walls.

Steely J reclines upon a bench seat torn from a truck. He's naked as a Greek statue. His eyes roll back and forth, white to black. Leeches, that's what my brain was trying to say. Leeches of varying length hang from his neck and his man-tits. One, swollen to the heftiness of a kid's arm, gloms onto his groin, its bulk flopped across his thigh like a nightmarish wang. Makes sense—femoral artery runs through there. A prime tap. He slurps from a mostly deflated bag of blood, his expression dreamy and fucked up. In with the fresh, right? Those are Mike's boots poking from behind the bench seat-couch, for sure.

Another man, stark-staring naked too, rises from behind the couch and moves around the side. He kneels and gently detaches the leech from Steely's groin. Cheeks gleaming sweat, the stranger glances at me and smirks the dopey, amiable peasant smirk that has enthralled nightclub audiences since 1970-fucking-four. He tenderly lays the leech on a towel and sticks it with a horse-needle syringe. Pulls the plunger and draws creamy black blood into the barrel.

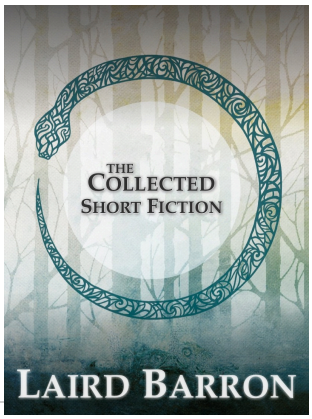
Steely J rouses himself. His marble gaze rolls to me. "Hi, JV. What can I do for you?"

"Never mind." I turn and head for the stairs. No keys for the car. Mike's motorcycle is beyond my capabilities. Town is a major hike for a girl with a bum leg. Too afraid to look over my shoulder. Swear there's heavy movement behind me, though. The universe and its bullet-fast molecules slow to a crawl.

First things first. I have to make it out of the house and call for help (that should be an interesting conversation). What are the odds I'll make it? Everybody knows that when seconds count, the state troopers are minutes away.

The TV volume kicks in. A laugh track swells and booms and fills my ears.

Andy Kaufman Creeping Through The Trees



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Autumn, 1998

Senior year of high school isn't the best of times. It is totally the other way. And how shall I count the ways? Cancer is eating my father alive. He's got six months, a year, it's anybody's guess. How many of those days will be worth a damn? He's sort of a tough-as-shoe-leather guy and I bet he'll make it hard on himself, on us all. Both our dogs, Little Egypt and Odysseus, bit the dust from old age during summer vacation. Not enough drama? The last week of August I almost kill myself on the new trampoline. Okay, technically, I fly off the trampoline and do a half-gainer into the side of our house. Instant KO.

Why does this even happen (and why me)? Solution: The Universe is a real bitch. Sometimes she smirks and gives you what you want. My heart's desire is a full-sized trampoline to practice cheer moves on. Well done, cosmos, you perverse whoremaster. A neighbor lost his job way up north in the Prudhoe Bay oil fields and put basically everything he owned out on the lawn at fire-sale prices. The neighbor kids cried when we loaded the trampoline into the bed of our truck. Flash forward twenty-four hours and it's me singing the blues.

I get cocky and bounce hard near the edge and *Kaboing!* Thank Satan the rhododendron bush cushions the impact. Also, thank you, dearly departed Anton LaVey, our Lord and Savior, I am alone for this debacle. None of the other girls bear witness to my humiliation. Dad has passed out drunk earlier than usual and doesn't hear the thud or the shattering china. Also kinda bad,

though. I lie stunned for a few seconds, then angry yellow jackets swarm from their nest in the bushes and sting the ever-loving hell out of me.

Neck brace, knee brace, swollen face. The knee is the worst, although sharing Renee Zellweger's squinty pout for a week is not to be envied. The sorry result of my misery? One of my rivals (probably trailer park queen Reyline Showalter) will lead the cheer squad when our boys pillage their way to state again. Grr! Is it too petty of me to hope the team suffers a rash of injuries and misses the playoffs?

Damn our soon-to-be ex-neighbor and his stupid discount trampoline he bought for his stupid brats. Damn the universe and all its devices, such as gravity, colorectal cancer, and children.

The mound of get-well cards is impressive. So many, many flowers and gift baskets, it becomes tedious to sort them for the contraband. Chocolate! Stuffed toys! Poppers (bless you Benny Three-Trees)! Porno disguised as *Cosmopolitan, Girls' Life,* and *Seventeen!* Rob Zombie and Weezer CDs!

I'm blonde, taut, and hot. Everybody loves me and everybody else hates me. I know who's who—pals write, *Hey Julie Vellum, Yo, Julie V, get well, babe;* meanwhile, fools call me Julie Five, or Stuck-Up Bitch, and say, *Too bad you only sprained your neck.* It's vital to know the sides. High school is a cold war no more or less a game than East versus West. Most of the girls, pro or con Julie Vellum, are super smooth and you can't go by kind words or a friendly smile. If you don't keep the factions and the alliances straight, you'll get a knife between the shoulder blades. Been there (middle school), no thanks.

Human nature; what are you going to do? After my tragic accident and the initial flood of sympathy, even my tightest friends avoid me like I'm Typhoid Mary. A knee brace or an arm cast can be sexy if you work it right. *Neck* braces, visible swelling, and contusions are totally uncool. Emotionally, I'm not well-equipped to cope, even if my upbringing suggests otherwise.

Being an only child kinda sucks when it doesn't totally rock. My shrink (Mom's idea), an ex-pill dispenser to the stars, says ugly sibling rivalries

are transferred to my peers and blown up on the stage and that I should watch my step. She's right despite her ignominious status as a Beverly Hills refugee—I sharpen these claws on classmates and it's earned me a bit of a reputation for being a super-bitch. Meanwhile, Grandpa says acting snotty is a cover for weakness and it's too bad I don't have a brother to keep me in check. He seldom wears shirt or pants and handily out-drinks Dad, believe it or don't.

I take this wise counsel in stride.

Haters can talk shit all they like, I am *not* an entitled high school slut cheerleader. I am a regal and voraciously *sexual* high school cheerleader. Besides, I didn't actually do the deed until Rocky Eklund, then the backup quarterback, popped my cherry after the team took state last fall. Junior freaking year. Yeesh. Ask Robin Sloan or Indra Norse when they first gave it up. Ask those skanks, Jessica Mace and her cousin Liz Lochinvar. *I* was practically a cloistered virgin before the dam broke. Unless we're counting hand jobs and BJs. In that case, it would be fifth grade and creepy, so let's not.

A week of school convinces me that I'm in political exile. Woman without a Country. The second tier girls and hangers-on occupy my table in the cafeteria; talk about a come-down. Greetings range from nervous to frosty. Nobody looks me in the eye. Smiling the hard smile Jackie taught, I seriously worry my face will get stress fractures. I read the history of the Borgias during lunch and fantasize about a mass poisoning.

Rocky has football practice (I'm giving my beau his space; got to provide him political cover until I shed the scaggy collar) and then beers and pool at Mike Zant's house after Thursday class. Doc won't let me drive until I can turn my head again.

I catch a lift with Steely J. We have business anyhow. His ride is a Toyota wagon with Visqueen taped over the rear side windows. Two hundred and thirty thousand miles on the odometer. He keeps the wagon spiffy as a military bunk, oddly enough, and daisy-sweet with a cluster of air fresheners rubber-banded to the rearview. Be that as it may, I spread a

handful of cafeteria napkins on the passenger seat. My hunch says a blacklight would paint a very different picture of the environment.

Steely J resides in the friend camp. He's in the friend camp for *most* of us, not to be confused with a buddy or a pal or a member of the crew. Dude is like Australia or Switzerland; up for hijinks and not the teeniest bit judgy. He's a fixer and you don't have to like a fixer to love one. Tall, really quiet, although not broody, he-man quiet; closer to a great white shark cruising through the shallows. And white is right—he's Whitey McWhite cream cheese complexioned. He walks soft, sorta hunched in his lumpy sweaters, buzz cut, black frame glasses, and sneakers for sneaking.

A man of unexpected facets, he's obsessed with ancient aliens (Greys built the Pyramids!) and a hundred and one doomsday scenarios. The universe is a hologram and the only real gods are likely horrifically evolved humanoids or giant blobs of sentient protoplasm. His father worked for a pharmaceutical company and had taken his whole weirdo family on months-long business vacations to Borneo and the Amazon Basin when the kids were little.

We've shared bizarre conversations. Craziest exchange happened after I paid him to get the test key to Math finals. Apropos of absolutely nothing (although I had the sniffles), he said, *Wonder why I never get sick?*

Not really. Fair question though. Granted, the pasty bastard isn't an exemplar of health, yet I don't recall him ever missing school from the seasonal crud.

I bleed myself.

Like Dark Ages bleeding? Smoke enemas? Barf me out, dude.

Dark Ages is recent history. Bleeding goes back to the Hellenic. In the 1920s missionaries brought it here from South American death cults. Got to propitiate them old black gods with rivers of blood, y'know.

I'm quite sure I don't.

Bad blood out, fresh blood in. Ever want to give it a whirl, I've got the kit. Make a superwoman out of you for real.

Fresh blood in? What did that even mean? I decided I didn't give a shit. I'd let it return to haunt me at some future 3 A.M.

He doesn’t do sports despite his “perfect” health and even though he’d wallop most of the boys with his bizarro, predatory grace. Elmer D. (the only dude I know who *might* take Steely J mano a mano) said there was an incident at wrestling tryouts and Coach Grinky eighty-sixed Steely J hardcore.

Side note: I fooled around with Elmer the summer of our junior year, but have since nixed our romance. His dad wrecked their truck this past winter. Mr. D. burned and Elmer survived with some wicked scars. I pretend he doesn’t exist because now I’m rolling with Mr. Future-All-State-full-ride-to-some-powerhouse-football-town. JV be trading up, haters.

Steely J is solid with the rich kids (especially Fat Boy Tooms). Rumor is, he gophers for them since he can pass for legal, has a boss fake ID, knows no fear, and, most importantly, is scruple-free. You want weed, booze, or heavier stuff, you call Hostettler or Benny Three Trees. You need somebody to hold for you, alibi for you, or step-‘n-fetch-it, Steely J is your prole. He makes book on sports events and makes unwanted pets vanish. He’s the source for cheap designer clothes, “borrowed” power tools, scalped tickets, and VIP invites to password-at-the-door-parties. It’s this last detail that interests me at the moment.

I hit him with the lowdown. “Okay, dude, look. My dad. He has cancer.” This confession has the opposite effect from what I expected. Instead of relief, my stomach tightens. The bile in my throat must be remorse.

“Sorry to hear it.” Steely J speaks in a monotone drawl that pitches slightly to indicate his mood. In this case, it descends toward baritone. He gives a shit, although not much of one. “What kind?”

“The way he guzzles Maker’s Mark, you’d think cirrhosis, but nope. Rectal cancer.”

“Huh.”

“This is eyes-only need to know, so keep your lips zipped.”

“Not planning to do a press release. Damn.”

“Good, or it’s your balls.”

“Sure your purse has got room for ’em?”

“It’s a coin purse. Plenty of room for your junk. I need a favor.”

“Heck of a way of asking.”

“My dad’s birthday is October ninth. He loved Andy Kaufman, see. Absolutely adored him, is more to the point. Dee Dee Andersen says her brother knows a guy at the Gold Digger who saw the booking sheet for Halloween. That lounge singer character Kaufman did in the ’70s is on the schedule—”

“Tony Clifton.”

“Yes, Tony Clifton. Live and in person. What I need—”

“*The* Tony Clifton… Here, in Anchorage?” Steely J’s monotone pitches higher.

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

“Fucking A! Who’s playing him? Zmuda, I bet. Has to be Zmuda.”

“*One* of Kaufman’s buddies, obviously. That’s not the important—”

“You’d assume one of his compatriots. On the other hand, maybe Clifton actually exists. True story, Kaufman and Zmuda planned to work on a film biography of Clifton and how Kaufman originally discovered him at a hotel in Vegas and they got to be friends, and so on. Fell through because *Heartbeeps* didn’t sell enough tickets. Bummer.” He drives like turtles screw so we’ve apparently got all the time in the world.

“You should write a book.”

He doesn’t react to my sarcasm. “Comedians tap into the infinite. Black Kryptonite.”

“Fascinating, not really, but—”

“Kaufman faked his own death. Something hinky about these random gigs Clifton does. Think about that—fourteen years and he’s still dropping in to do his old routine, and for what? Nobody except fogies like your dad even remember him. The *whole* setup is hinky. Kaufman might’ve been sick of the limelight. Fame gets some people down. *Heartbeeps* was pretty bad. Okay, it reeked. That’s why he faked his death and retired to a South Pacific island and he comes around to yank our chains every once in a while. It’s possible, right?”

“For the love of… No, J. Neither of those are possible. I don’t even.” My lips hurt, we’re way off in the weeds, and I’m about to blow a fuse. The pressure of being Julie Vellum can be crushing.

He licks his cheek. “Yeah, yeah. I know. It would be cool.”

“Please pay attention. Dee Dee says the show is a hush-hush exclusive. One night only. There’s a secret list. I want Daddy on that list.”

He smiles. His incisor is silver. The smile doesn’t change his expression much more than a lone cloud moving across the sky. “Clifton rules. Best character Kaufman ever did, easy. I’ll make some calls, see if it’s legit.”

“Super. What’s it gonna set me back?”

He flicks a glance my way. His tongue protrudes again, tasting the possibilities. “I dunno. BJ?”

I tap the brace that ratchets my neck and chin so severely it might as well be one of those Elizabethan collars the vet puts on a dog. My eyes and nose are still swollen and my lips are fat enough I’m taking vital nutrients through a straw. “You probably play the lottery too. C’mon, dude. I’m in no condition. *You’re* in no condition. Blowing you is against the Geneva Convention.”

“Well, you look like a walking glory hole. Fifty bucks. Plus whatever the tickets go for, if this is legit.” Fifty bucks is his asking price for everything from shoplifting eyeliner, to scoring tickets, to committing grand larceny or felonious assault.

“Deal!” I almost shake his pallid, sweaty paw before I come to my senses. His parents own a place on the hillside. Didn’t mom and dad J relocate to the Midwest in ’95 and basically abandon the property? Rings a bell. He’s got a litter of younger siblings. Pale, snot-nosed ankle-biters who look like they should be floating in jars of formaldehyde. Did his family abandon him? You can attend public school until the age of twenty-one. I think he’s close. Does he sleep in his car? In the trunk (a coffin)? Is he communicable? He wears the same sweater several days in a row. Dirt under his nails is a given. Drops of blood crust the toes of his sneakers. His favorite all-weather ensemble is a Seahawks track suit, plus a goose down parka when the mercury dips. He smells ripe and his cheap aftershave is insufficient to the challenge. He habitually sips I-don’t-have-a-clue-what

from a mason jar jammed inside a grody Starbucks cup holder. His breath is raw as fuck. He appears pudgy unless you've been around ball players and weightlifters and recognize there's earth-moving brawn under the panda-bear-softness. Why do his eyes make me think of fish? I consider these mysteries for half a second and we're home sweet home.

Steely J says as I open the car door, "Ever have an imaginary friend? When you were a kid?"

"Jesus," I say.

Mom insists I call her Jackie. It's a Unitarian thing, maybe? She and Dad lived in California right out of high school. Jackie got knocked up, then she got religion. She was too busy giving birth to me to finish college. By the time I entered Kindergarten, she'd ditched the whole stay-at-home-mom routine (bailed on the church, too), took a few night classes in business, and embarked on a career as a hotshot saleswoman of water purification systems.

Dad couldn't hack UCLA no matter how he tried. He slunk home to Girdwood, Alaska, in defeat. Grandpa gave him a superintendent job at the chemical plant in Anchorage. Dad's name is Jeff. He doesn't let me call him Jeff; he's not a Unitarian and the Valley didn't rub off on him. Mom, I mean, Jackie, got the full dose and passed it along to me.

Jackie travels the globe. She stays on the road two weeks out of every month. She's an absentee parent, which makes her pretty damned rad. Sure, it blew chunks (and to whom it may concern, I don't suffer from bulimia; my athletic figure is purely genetic) during pre-adolescence not having a mom to teach me how to navigate middle school and getting my period and so forth. Past is the past (Grandpa says it's prologue). I've come to appreciate the combined-arms-power of neglect and guilt. Besides, when she is around, she displays the demeanor of an indulgent queen dishing boons willy-nilly. Boys? *Do be careful, dear. Here's a variety pack of condoms.* Money? *Let's tack another twenty onto your allowance*. Out late? *Be home by dawn.* Can I have a car for my sweet sixteen? *Tell your father to take you to the dealership. Nothing too fast, okay?* Best part is, once I

grew tits I magically became eligible for her Machiavellian advice, which she dispenses freely.

Fun and games notwithstanding, there is a single ironclad rule. On my first morning as a freshman at Onager High, Jackie drove me to the front entrance and we sat in the car bopping to “Black Hole Sun” and verifying our makeup. A dark-haired girl in a leather jacket, jeans, and combat boots got out of a stone age Ford truck.

Jackie grabbed my arm real hard and said in a witchy, hateful voice that surely belonged to someone else’s mom, *See that little twat dressed like a Jet? That’s Jessica Mace. Her bitch mother is Lucius. Redneck losers. Stay away from them or you’ll be sorry.*

I didn’t have the slightest clue as to her damage (and the fact a lot of people consider *us* to be barely one step out of the trailer park made me wonder if dear old Ma was projecting). My arm hurt with those talons squeezing tight. Why the drama? Yeah, the Mace chick was trouble from the way she stood, all badass nonchalant with her mouth crimped like a real bad ass, somebody who carried a switchblade. Still, I could handle it. *Jeez, Jackie. Get real. I’m not scared of redneck trash.*

Fear me, *then.*

What? I’m not scared of you either.

Pow! Jackie backhanded me and smashed my lip. Prior to that shocking moment, she’d never lifted a finger to check my antics. Dad did the discipline in our house. I sat there in shock while she dabbed the blood with a hanky and straightened my hair.

We’re copacetic? She smiled, gangster-hard. Nobody ever really knew her, or this is why Dad drinks.

I swallowed my tears and bailed. Had to slink past Mace loitering on the sidewalk. The girl appraised me with narrowed eyes and a smirk.

You’ve got something on your face.

Jackie needn’t have worried. I hated Mace already.

Three years on and we haven’t revisited the topic. Everything seems rosy between mother-dearest and me. Jackie may be less creepy than Steely J, however that doesn’t make it easier to read her. She is, after all, the one who

assigned *The Prince* as bedside reading. *Smile, then stick it to them, honey. Instead of wrist-wrist, elbow-elbow, it's smile-smile, stab-stab. It is totally better to be feared than loved.*

She recently returned from a trip to the Midwest, hell-bent as ever on expanding her empire conference by grueling conference. I haven't told her of my plan to surprise Dad with Tony Clifton tickets. Maybe I will, when I get some more courage. Since Dad got diagnosed with the big C, she acts as if she almost loves him again. Freaks me the hell out.

Dad's on a permanent vacation from the plant. He drinks more than ever. Surrounds himself with cartons of Natty Light and Maker's Mark and slouches in the den in the dark watching horror flicks with the sound low on his pride and joy RCA box—he doesn't need the volume; he knows the script by heart and mutters his lines with the embittered diligence of a failed actor. He surfaces for dinner that Jackie or I cook (defrost). Sits at the head of the table (at least two beer cans or a whiskey next to his plate) with a drowning man's grin and asks how our day went. Doesn't slur, although he speaks slowly and his eyes are bloodshot.

Today, he's absorbed in the *Montel Williams Show* and oblivious to me limping past on the way to my bedroom. Bunko, the grizzled tomcat, follows at my heel, same as he always does. Jackie feeds Bunko, Dad kicks him, and *I* pet him and give him love. He's as close to a brother as it's going to get around here.

By the way, the reason I'm an only child is Jackie had two miscarriages and an abortion before she gave birth to breech-baby me. According to her, she'd argued with Dad about whether to keep me at all. I'm not sure which of them was pro or con Julie. My foes say she conceived me in the backseat of Dad's jalopy and that she needed a baby to keep him leashed. For the record, she doesn't deny it.

Reflecting on grade school, I realize how lonely our home was due to Mom's relentless travel schedule. Dad let me stay up late and watch *Taxi* reruns with him when she was away. Sloppy Joes, Tang, and an ice cream sandwich for dinner on a TV tray on the couch in my Cabbage Patch Kids PJs. Movie of the week or a western or some standup comedy from his stack of VHS tapes. I'm not exaggerating—he loved Kaufman, and Robin

Williams, and Bill Hicks (grooved on horror by Lewton, Carpenter, and Romero, but decided I was too young to go that heavy). The rough stuff did it for him—brutal satire and white man madness fumed from those comedians. Except for the profanity, most of it went over my head. No worries; those were the rare occasions that I got to be Daddy's little girl instead of a piece of furniture.

He cried his eyes out the day after Kaufman passed away. Drank himself into a stupor in honor of Hicks a decade later. Dad didn't shed tears over Hicks, though. I'm not sure he had any left after 1984.

Whatever our problems, he's my dad and he's dying and I have to believe it's a signal from the universe that Dee Dee Andersen told me about Clifton's forthcoming surprise appearance. I'm infamous for deviousness not imagination. Until this opportunity, I haven't thought of a single meaningful gesture to show Dad I care the way a daughter is supposed to care (even though my heart feels kind of numb). I'm selfish and big enough to admit the failing.

I lie in bed and crank the Matthew Good Band. I do a couple of poppers and hope they can help sort out some of this bullshit. My prayer is, *Save the day, Steely J, you weird, weird dude*. Bunko nuzzles under my jaw, where the brace seam is snuggest, and purrs. He loves the shit out of my cone of shame.

Rocky calls on my rhinestone-studded telephone in the wee hours after Dad has fallen asleep in front of the TV and Jackie disappears into her bedroom lair downstairs to consult spreadsheets. Rocky's favorite topics are football and his car in no particular order. Tonight is more of the same. Eventually he remembers to ask how I'm doing. Am I already an afterthought? Did he call so late because he took one of my many, many rivals on a cruise of the Eklutna Flats in his damned midnight-blue Iroc-Z? Time for another popper. Bingo-bongo, better.

Rocky says, "Babe, I ran into your pal, Steely J at the store. Freaky you should ask him to score Clifton tickets. You and him are Kaufman nuts?"

"Hey, now. I wouldn't exactly say I'm a nut—"

“Fucker gives me the willies.”

“Steely J isn’t for everyone. Still, where would you get your discount ’roids without him?”

“I meant Kaufman.”

“Kaufman’s definitely not for everyone either,” I say. “You’re in luck, considering the fact he’s dead as a doornail, Jim. Supposedly, haha.”

“He was evil.”

“How evil was he?”

“Caveman in a cave raping all the cavewomen evil. Freeze frame his face next time you watch one of his old shows. Pure, violent malevolence.” Rocky breathes heavily, the way he does after a hard practice or a screw-session in his car. “The others have other ones. These celebrity haunts. Jim Morrison. Jim Belushi. Freddy Mercury. Bette Davis. Charlie Chapman. Gilda Radner. Marilyn Monroe. Elvis.”

“Uh, baby? Is this a joke?” I’m losing my pleasant buzz with a quickness. Rocky isn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer. I would not have guessed “malevolence” is within a million miles of his vocabulary. His jokes concern bodily functions and referring to his rivals as faggots. If this isn’t a joke, I’m not sure I want to know what it is.

“Stifle yourself and listen. There’s an entry with a roster in the black almanac, but I haven’t read it, and maybe it’s a lie. I knew one unlucky kid who claimed visitations from Peter Lorre. Makes my blood run cold and mine is bad enough. Sometimes I see Andy Kaufman creeping through the trees outside our house. He shows himself when something awful is on the way.”

“Uh, you see Andy Kaufman. Lurking. Am I hearing you right?”

“You’re hearing me right. Months go by and nothing, then poof! He’s every-damned-where. Follows me home from school and stands under my window and grins. Winks at me through the stacks at the library. I know he’s real because I’ve seen his tracks and because it’s happened to members of my family going back generations. How far? How deep? Deep as a cobra back-slipping into its hidey hole? Is it just entertainers? Maybe it’s all sorts of dead famous people. Did the pale visage of George Washington vex my

child grandfather as he huddled with his Boy Scout troop around the fire? Did Ben Franklin meet the Bard on some lonely deer path in Virginia? The way Franklin doped and drank and forswore a Christian deity, I bet it is so."

Visage? Vex? This is pod person talk. Has my boyfriend had a brain transplant? I let the silence stretch. "Rocky, have you been hitting the nitrous again? You sound totally fucked up."

"I'm high on plasma. Speaking of fucking. To be honest, babe, I *had* to get my rocks off. Today was a real stressor. I drove Reyline to the flats and banged her like a drum. Didn't mean anything. She's a skank. I double-wrapped my junk." He waits for me to respond; I don't because my heart is a lump of ice in my throat. He eventually goes on, "Don't be pissed. You are, aren't you? I get it. I was disgusted with what I'd done and I thought about capping her on the spot. Crack her open and dump the whole mess into the bay. I've done it before. Usually I stick to dogs because nobody misses them. Nobody makes a federal case over a dead animal. You still there?" Rocky laughs and it's not his laugh, it changes. Steely J says, "Sorry, JV. Just messing with you. I've got a natural talent for mimicry."

"Holy shit, you asshole. Be sure to put that in as your yearbook quote. *A natural talent for being a douche*." I can't tell if I'm having a heart attack. Bunko wakes from whatever cats dream of and his fur puffs. He yowls, swipes a claw at my phone-hand, and leaps from the bed.

Steely J laughs again and says in a not-quite perfect imitation of Rocky, "For the record, your boyfriend is a schmuck. Two to one he *is* taking a cruise with Reyline as we speak. Probably imagines he's spiking a puppy instead of a football whenever he scores a TD. It's in those beady eyes. What I said about Kaufman is also true. He really started coming around my place one dark autumn. For my dad it was James Dean. I'll tell you the whole story later."

He hangs up before I can answer with a stream of profanity. Amazement overcomes my immediate anger. Got to hand it to the freak—it's an epic prank. I laugh it off like I'm supposed to. Not so deep down, I wish there was someone like a friend to call and unburden myself.

I ditch the neck brace and my lips finally deflate to regulation air pressure. Better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick (one of Granddad's top five quotes, although the way my luck is running, the pointy end of a stick might have my name on it).

After a week with no contact, I track Steely J to the school stadium. It's lunch period. He's hanging with Jessica Mace on the football stadium bleachers. Surprising, given their history of mutual animosity. During seventh grade, he snapped her bra strap on a dare from Nolan Culpepper. Mace clobbered Steely J with a bicycle pump. Thirty stitches and no truce. Yet here they are, thick as thieves. Like I said: high school is global politics in microcosm. Factions are ever-shifting ice sheets, calving, drifting, merging.

Mace rises with languid insolence and blocks the path. She wears a faded jersey that reads ANCHORAGE WOLVERINES ROLLER DERBY SQUAD 1978. Her mom's blood is still spackled in the fiber. Lucius Lochinvar (her maiden name) had skated under the handle Scara Fawcett. A goon. Jackie knew her, even back then. Whatever happened with them led to a twenty-year feud. Violence is my bet. Thuggishness seems to be a Lochinvar-Mace trait.

Down on the field, my girls of Raven Squad are drilling—*Raven Power! Let's go, Ravens, Let's Go! Raaa-ven Power! Juke To The Left, Juke To The Right! Beat Em Up, Beat Em Off, Fight-Fight-Fight! Raven Power! Raven Power! Rat Shit, Bat Shit, Yay Team!* Something along those lines.

"Hey Julie Five. How's tricks?" Mace smiles, and like Steely J, it means less or more or worse than you'd think it does. She may as well have a storm cloud boiling overhead. Her eyes are fierce. Eyes of a drunk or a woman who just had angry sex. Her fighting rings glint—three on the left, two on the right. The death's head could crack a bone.

My inclination is to smack her with my crutch. I rein in the impulse.

She puts her hands on her hips. "Julie, you're a cooz and I'm calling you out."

"What's up your ass?"

"Elmer's a dear personal friend of mine. You kicked him to the curb. Broke his heart. I'm going to do unto you by breaking your face."

“Think so?”

“Know so.”

“Isn’t this is a teensy bit out of the blue?”

“Been on my honey-do-list for a while.”

I flash a sneer to cover the fact my knees are knocking. “Real brave picking a fight with a girl halfway in traction.”

“Don’t worry, sweetie. I like cold dishes. This’ll wait until that chicken leg is out of the brace. Be sure to keep your veterinarian on speed-dial. You’re gonna require his services.”

“Fuck you in the ear,” is my witty rejoinder as I squeeze by.

Mace sticks a cigarette into the corner of her mouth. “Save the date, bitch.”

Steely J sits on a bench, filming the cheer squad with a handheld movie camera. He doesn’t glance at me as I collapse beside him. “Jessica M. is in a bad mood. Might want to avoid her.” His lips barely move. He did a ventriloquist routine at the school talent show once. His dummy had lacked a lower jaw and its sundress costume was rotten with mold. He’d called her Veronica. Have I mentioned Steely J is an odd duck?

“Nice, thanks. What’re you doing, perv?”

“Picking out victims.”

“Hello?”

“Annual sacrifice to the death gods is nigh. If I’m gonna be the American Fulci, got to get my hands bloody.”

“Sick. Start with Showalter. You could be right and the twat is gunning for my spot at the head of the squad.”

“Only a virgin sacrifice will do.”

“The death gods are going to starve around here, I guess.”

“Sometimes terror is enough. Put on the mask of the dark of the moon and wander the earth.”

“Damn, Steely, you say some loco bullshit. Ought to hang with the goth kids. They’d love your shtick.”

“I’m too edgy. The goths don’t feel me.”

“Go figure. Anything on those tickets? You’re supposed to be hooking me up. You gonna come through, or is your rep bullshit too?”

He sets the camera in his lap. “Meant to tell you, I checked with my sources. Clifton isn’t on the schedule.”

“Dee Dee swears he is.”

“Dee Dee got suckered by secondhand info. It’s smoke. Somebody probably thought it’d be a great joke to start the rumor. Classic Kaufman.”

I close my eyes and concentrate on not shrieking my frustration. I imagine the last time I kissed Rocky. Two days before the trampoline debacle. We’ve fucked thirty or forty times and it’s okay, although I never come. Is it me, or is my stud merely adequate? A busload of other girls would love to double-check my findings and that’s why I don’t complain. I imagine tripping Mace down the concrete staircase on the other side of the cafeteria. I’ve only seen her cry once after her younger brother was in a car accident. The memory of her ugly tears keeps me warm on long arctic nights. It helps now, too.

Steely J says, “There’s another possibility. We could get creative. Do some community theater. My audition was convincing, right?”

“This a *creative* way to separate me from fifty bucks?”

“*One hundred* bucks.”

“Where the hell am I going to get a hundred dollars?”

He mimes sucking a cock. “Seriously, though. I’ll need a week or two to rehearse. Perfect the delivery.”

“Rehearse? Rehearse what?”

“A command performance.”

“How come you’re so great at imitating voices?”

“Told you—it’s natural talent. I meditate at night. Sit in the middle of my room and open my mind to the cosmos. All kinds of shit is floating around in the dark. Seeps into us every minute of the day. I just figured a way to make it happen faster.”

“Anybody can meditate.”

His expression slackens by one or two turns of a screw. His pupils expand. Funny how a millimeter or two can change someone's face so dramatically. "See, I'm really into it now. Used to take all night in full lotus. I can slip sideways at will." He wriggles his tongue and says in a Don Pardo voice: "Would you care to hear my idea?"

"I'm all ears." A glib pronouncement that belies serious misgivings regarding my deepening association with Steely J, Man of a Thousand Voices. I should have obeyed my instinct to tell him to piss up a rope.

Diehard leaves in the birch trees turn yellow and drop after a real cold snap toward the end of September. A few minutes past six and dark. I'm pacing in front of the window, nervous as a freshman awaiting her prom date. Hilariously, Jackie and Dad figure from the way I'm behaving Rocky is going to pop the question. Dad has spent a significant portion of the afternoon sharpening a Bowie Knife from the display case in the basement. He's only half drunk. There's an omen for you. Jackie warms him a TV dinner. The gusto with which he attacks his Salisbury steak confirms he'll adjust to his inevitable group home environment with aplomb.

Steely J's car parks with one tire on the curb. Even though he'd warned me, I'm jarred by his radical transformation from oafish, pervy teenager to the hulking schlub in the Vegas lounge singer suit who strolls up the walkway. Middle-aged, pale, bad toupee, worse skin, tinted glasses, ruffled shirt and bowtie, gut overhanging his belt, disco pants, and scuffed loafers. He carries a case sheathed in red velvet in his left hand. The change wouldn't be more complete if he'd transformed into a werewolf.

I open the front door and do a spit-take. It's really Tony Clifton, or at least someone who resembles Clifton. No way, no freaking way—Steely J has to be under there somewhere, right? Unless he's paid one of his pals to act as an accomplice and *really* sell the gag. He knows everybody and one of them could be an actor on the make.

"J, is it you?" I whisper as he grips my fingers near the tips and gives them a shake the way you do with a toddler.

“Tony C, baby. Tony C plays live.” His accent is nasally and he smells like he took a bath in Aqua Velva. I still can’t decide. “Course, you’ve invited me in, I can return anytime I wanna.” He says it deadpan.

Jackie comes around the corner. Her stare wavers between bewilderment and horrified recognition. Mommy dearest is a control freak. She dislikes the unexpected. “Who is this, dear?” That stilted tone reminds me of the time she slapped my mouth. She’s wearing a red blouse and a black skirt and the shoes she won’t be caught dead in away from the house. I also know she knows Tony Clifton from her conversations with Dad over the years. I hate it when she plays coy. She truly does take Machiavelli to heart.

Steely J winks. “Hi, toots. Be a doll and fix me a drink, will ya.”

Before she can yell at him, I tell her it’s Dad’s big surprise. Step aside and let the magic happen, Mom! She frowns and departs for the kitchen to mix a tray-load of cocktails. Monday is Caribou Lou night at the Vellum casa. Steely J, or whoever the fuck, ambles after me into the den and there’s Dad slumped on his La-Z-Boy throne, a yellow Husqvarna ball cap tilted back. Blue light from the oversized TV screen glints in his eye as he regards the spectacle of Steely J unpacking a karaoke box and microphone. After a few minutes of strained silence, Dad gestures at me with his knife. His expression is similar to Mom’s. Expectant with dread and willfully ignorant. “Honey, what the Sam Hill is going on?”

I take his free hand and say in a well-honed baby-girl voice, “Daddy, a friend of mine heard you’re a major fan of Tony Clifton. Tony’s in town for a couple of nights and—”

“Don’t bore your old man to death, sweetheart,” Steely J says and the accent slips. However, his patronizing contempt is one hundred percent authentic Clifton. “You’re giving me an earache. Where’s my highball?” He snags a glass from Jackie’s tray as she edges by and swats her ass hard enough to make her bunny hop.

I’m astonished: A) the jerk has the nerve, and B) my mom blushes and keeps stepping as if she’s a cocktail waitress pulling a shift in a 1960s club. What the fuck, over?

My heart flutters—Dad will blow sky-high; aggression and territorial pissing are hardwired into him. Instead, he smirks and a trapdoor opens in

the collage of my memories of childhood. Sure, I'm used to their civil antipathy. Nonetheless, there's a rawness to Dad's smile; his hatred is laid bare. Things with them are more complicated and bitter than I'd dared to imagine.

Steely J leans over and his pants ride his crack. He switches on the sound. After a burst of feedback piano keys tinkle, building. "All right, all right, everybody park your caboose so's I can get this show on the road. I can't stay here all evening, I got a gig in Anchorage. My manager lined up this charity crap or else I'd be at the Gold Digger squeezing pole dancer titties and drinking real booze. You know it, cousin."

Dad guffaws. "Gimme some Pat Boone."

"Shuddup, wiseacre. I'll sing what I wanna sing." Steely J clears his throat. "As it happens, I wanna do a number by Pat B." He proceeds to sing, or kind of sing, "Speedy Gonzalez," including the cartoonish bridges by Speedy and his put-upon wife. Visualize, if you will, a flat affect teen mimicking a dead comedian imitating a middle-aged crooner who enunciates through his nose imitating a faux Spanish accent and fucking the lyrics over precisely enough to sprain your brain, and you get the picture.

"Sweet baby Jesus, what am I hearing?" Jackie mutters through her clenched teeth. She grips my elbow while smiling to shame a constipated beauty queen. "Who is this idiot?"

I return the grin with interest. "Tony Clifton, Ma. None other. Look how happy Daddy is."

"Speedy Gonzalez" wraps. The lull segues into an instrumental. Steely J huffs and puffs. Sweat makes tracks in his makeup. He sips the highball and nods at Dad. "Alaska, huh? Land of the Midnight Sun. Where men are men and so are the women. That wife of yours, buddy. Whadda ya do? Kidnap a mountain goat and slap a dress on it? Lady, another round and keep 'em coming." He hands Jackie (who looks like she's chewing tenpenny nails) his empty as the intro for "Green, Green Grass of Home" kicks in.

At this point, I'm naïve enough to hope it's going to be a success. Alas, during the instrumental, Steely J says to my dad, "Last time I did a charity set, it was at a children's ward. Cue-ball central. Really pathetic, I tell ya. Now, you look pretty good for a guy with the big C. Really good, really

vibrant. Can't tell what's under your hat. Looks like a full head a hair. You got some meat on your bones. Got a nice gut goin', hey? Dunno, maybe beer has cancer-retarding qualities and that's why your hair hasn't all fallen out yet. Cancer of the ass, right?"

"Jeff isn't on chemotherapy," Jackie says coldly. She directs a withering glance at me. "Julie, I don't know who this… lout is, or if he's a friend, of yours, but I've had quite enough—"

Steely J snickers and waves dismissively. "'Quite enough'? Way you stomp around the house in your fuck-me pumps, you ain't had *any* in a while. Amirite, Jeff? Cancer of the asshole does take a man's zest for life out of the equation. How you supposed to concentrate on shtupping the missus when you're distracted by a burning ring of fire?"

"Oh my." I cover a horrified smile with my hand. I can smell the brimstone. The roof is sure to collapse and bury us alive any second. Such is my desperate plea to a non-existent God, at any rate. Dad and Jackie appear dumbfounded.

"Christ almighty, I'm thirsty." Steely J tosses the mike and does his penguin-strut out of the den.

"He has to leave. Immediately!" This from Jackie. She grips a shelf for support. Weakened and shocked, she'll recover to assume her ultimate form in a minute, I have no doubt.

"Mom—"

"Fine! I'm calling the police!" Strength returning. Rage will do the job.

"Overkill, Mom. Overkill."

"No, that's it. I'm calling 911."

"Mom, Jackie, what do you want the cops to do?"

"What do I want? What do I want! I *want* him to take his crappy karaoke box and get the hell away from us!"

"I'm gonna stab him," Dad says thoughtfully. He hasn't moved, and his expression is sort of dopey rather than furious, but he's white-knuckling the Bowie knife. "Jackie, I don't like how he's talking. I'm gonna slice his neck."

I tell them to cool their jets and stay put for the love of God. I go after Steely J. He's not in the upper living room or the kitchen. I'd run through the back door if I were in his shoes. Not the dude's style. His car remains parked on the street. He's the sort to hang his head and absorb whatever verbal or physical punishment is dished at him. At the moment, it's the physical punishment that Dad will inflict that has me worried.

The door to the half bath is wide and there's Steely J on all-fours, head dipped into the toilet. His foot twitches as he gurgles and laps with the rabid gusto of a hound attacking his favorite bowl. Gag me with a spoon. I kind of scream and he shudders and gazes over his shoulder, water dripping from his askew fake mustache.

"Yeah?" He says in a voice I haven't heard before this moment. It isn't Tony Clifton's and it isn't quite his own.

"My parents are straight tripping. Holy shit. Get your ass out before Dad stabs you or my mom calls in SWAT." I'm convinced he's got to go for several reasons. Imminent injury will suffice. "Are you… Are you drinking that?"

He paws his smeary lips and cracks his neck. "I'm due a commission." Almost in character, although his pancake makeup is ruined.

"Please, dude. I'll catch you with the dough later."

"Fine. Pay Steely J." He rises unsteadily. His bulk crowds the whole bathroom. The front of his suit is soaked.

"God! Beat it before I hurl." Well, too late on that count.

I expect a mushroom cloud and nuclear fallout. Instead, Jackie tiptoes through the house with a sheepish expression. We mumble weather-related factoids. Dad continues to marinate. I hobble around campus and grit my perfect teeth (thank you, retainer manufacturing company!) when I hand Steely J his hundred bucks. He's cool; counts his money and walks away like nothing.

I tell the adventure to Rocky Friday night after a hot and heavy session on the Eklutna Flats. The neck brace is history and I'm looking fly, so we're on

again. It’s cold and he lets the engine idle. Stars are embedded in the steamy glass. Every passing set of headlights on the highway illuminates the interior of the Iroc with a spangled glow.

“Toilet water?” Rocky says. “Sounds like a laugh riot. Bet your parents lost their shit. Eric Michaels told me Steely J’s dad and Zane Tooms’s parents are asshole buddies with a whole slew of Chinese investors. They fund illegal hunting expeditions in Africa and Siberia to snuff endangered animals and drive up the prices of sex drugs and diet pills. The Asians think powdered rhino horn will get their shit hard. Anyway, these guys are betting that once a bunch of animals go extinct, their market share is gonna pay big bucks. Pretty cold, huh?”

I agree it’s pretty cold.

“I hope you didn’t pay for the Steely J con.”

“What else was I going to do?”

“Tell him to blow it out his ass. You owe him dick.”

“Nobody crosses Steely J on a debt.”

“Yeah, but the punk didn’t come through as promised. No deal.”

“I don’t know, Rock. He came to the house and did his routine. Technically, we’re the ones who pulled the plug—”

“Screw that noise.” His hair is mussed and sweaty. His shirt is unbuttoned. He reeks of me. He sets his jaw with gung-ho stubbornness. “What’s going to happen is, you’re receiving a refund. Right now. We’ll roll up to his pad and get him with the program.”

I don’t bother to argue. Rocky has the brains of the aforementioned blood-crazed rhino and there’s no point. “It’ll keep until tomorrow. How about we go another round, champ?”

“Another round.” He glances at his crotch with a flicker of doubt.

“Ding-ding.”

And that’s how I start along a path that teaches me there are worse things than calamitous domestic scenes or getting accidentally knocked up.

Rocky cruises by my place the following afternoon. Mike Zant idles behind him on Mike's dad's Kawasaki motorcycle. Mike is varsity fullback, totally hot, and a lunkhead among lunkheads—exactly the type of goon you bring along when you're planning something stupid. Rocky dares not approach the front step (he is familiar with Dad and Dad's knife). He honks until I get it together and walk over to see what he wants. He tells me to hop in. After some back and forth, I do.

And we're off to see Steely J with intentions of malice. I spend the next twenty minutes half-heartedly trying to convince Rocky this is a bad idea. I stole the hundred dollars from Jackie's sock drawer, she doesn't miss it, and so on. Nothing doing. He clenches his jaw and presses harder on the gas. Eventually I hunker in my seat and get quiet. Lots of hairpin turns on the road up the mountain to the house of J.

Lunkhead Mike won't wear a helmet over his majestic afro. The way he's laying the bike over on curves trying to match Rocky's pace, I'm worried he'll miss one and crash among the spruce.

Much as I protest against this trip, the cruel bitch inside of me hopes Rocky and Mike have to slap Steely J around. He embarrassed me in front of my parents and I'd love to have the money I stole from Jackie back in my hot little hand; there's a shoe sale on at the Dimond Center Mall in Anchorage.

The house lurks at the end of a steep drive (rutted and broken pavement), eighty or ninety feet off the main road. It might have been tits a decade ago, but the place is going to hell fast. Funky shake roof and siding peel from the house. Mother Nature rules Alaska. Lower floor is a daylight basement wedged into the hillside. Cruddy brown-yellow curtains are drawn. Trees everywhere. Last mailbox I noticed is a mile back, at least.

Steely J's Toyota is angled next to a state trooper cruiser on blocks. The cruiser may have been in a fire. Smashed in windows and busted light bar. Nearby, a rotting doghouse, but no dog. Reminds me how much I miss mine. Spruce branches, shorn by the last few windstorms, lie tangled in the dead grass. A raven perches on a splintered, disconnected telephone pole and gives me a knowing eye.

I pretend the hood of the Iroc is a piano and lounge atop it (awkwardly) while Rocky and Mike move up the driveway, climb a flight of rickety

stairs, and knock on the front door. The door opens and they step inside. The door closes and they're gone.

It's much cooler here. Sunlight slants through the canopy, feeble as a candle in a huge, wrecked mossy cathedral vault. Too chilly. I huddle in the car for a while. Problem is, Rocky took the keys and now my feet are totally freezing. Worse, no tunes.

This drags along for an unbearable while until Dee Dee's number beeps on my cell phone. Bored and vengeful, I answer. Just the twat I want to ream. She asks if my dad enjoyed the show at the Gold Digger and I tell her to cram it where the sun don't shine. She's genuinely taken aback—*Say what? Why you trippin'?* and like that. I thank her for the false info, and ruining my dad's birthday, fuck you very much.

"Whoa-whoa—I didn't feed you any bullshit."

"You said your pal was in the know about Clifton. Only the guy was never scheduled to appear. Nice, real nice."

"Julie, Julie, calm down. I told you, it was a private show. Clifton played—10PM sharp. My parents went. Dude's an asshole. Everybody loved it. Dad got an autographed photo. You're really spun, girl."

I tell her to blow a goat and end the call. Oh, dear dog, my wrath toward Steely cocksucker J has reached a crescendo. Murder is a possibility. The conniving bastard failed to secure tickets and concocted the whole performance to cover himself and charge me double. Fuming and plotting, I glance toward the house and notice the door has swung open again.

Somebody yells my name. The muffled cry doesn't repeat. Leaves me guessing. My imagination runs wild—Steely J's fat face getting knocked in by Mike's fist; Steely J's nads getting kicked around like a hacky sack. This is a pleasing fantasy, except… What if the boys go too far? What if they beat him to a pulp and forget to collect the loot? This situation practically begs for a woman's touch.

My knee is better every day. Rage makes a beautiful painkiller. I ascend the grade and climb the steps with less difficulty than I'd feared. Gets my heartrate going is all. Gawd, the house, though. Steely J carved something, maybe a crescent moon, into the wooden door panel. Inside, Lemon Pledge partially masks an underlying dankness. I wander around a dim maze. None

of the light switches work. Doors are nailed shut except to the kitchen and a half bathroom. Both rooms are Spartan and neat. Reminds me of his car.

Anger deserts me the way sweat evaporates, and leaves me clammy and flustered. Why would a person nail doors shut inside his home? Why haven't I heard any commotion? Why don't I call to Rocky and Mike? To this last, I can only say that the last thing a person does when exploring a semi-abandoned building is draw attention to one's self. It's a survival trait culled from inhaling enough slasher flicks. No fucking in an empty room and no calling out, *anybody there?* as you sneak around in your Nancy Drew shoes.

Thump-thump-thump goes my rubber-tipped crutch on floorboards in a long hall. I am a girl and instantly notice the lack of photos, paintings, or any form of decoration. Shit ain't right. At the end of the hall are stairs heading down into the basement. Of course, I hear Rocky's voice. He chuckles and so does someone else.

I get to the bottom of the steps and push through a heavy rubber sheet. Okay, creepy. The basement is a box and it's hot as a greenhouse. Afternoon light dribbles in at the edges of the curtains and there's a desk lamp glowing from a distant corner. TV monitor with the sound muted. Comedians are performing. A rich, earthy reek gets into my nose and gags me. Fertilizer, shit, dead leaves, wet copper, and green growing things. A squirmy smell. The J family used to summer in the Amazon. They brought some with, apparently.

Furniture is totally Steely J. An aquarium, or terrarium, not sure which, except it's economy sized. Two hundred gallons or more, pushed against the far wall. Racks of the sort you find in hospitals are positioned opposite one another and strung with IV tubes and baggies of what surely must be blood and other, clearer stuff. I've seen plasma; it's plasma. Wonderful.

Rocky squats in an inflatable pool near the terrarium. He doesn't acknowledge my appearance. He's in a zone. His jacket is unbuttoned. He's not wearing a shirt or pants. I linger on this image: Shirtless. Pantless. Unbuttoned jacket. Squatting in a kiddie pool of water. An object sticks to his breastbone. Fat as a big old rubbery turd from a novelty catalog. Grayish-brownish-black, and shiny-slick. Attached at his left nipple, it trails

to his belly. Vaguely familiar, possibly a specimen I've seen in Mr. Navarro's biology class. My poor brain will catch up real soon. The lighting is bad, but the passing seconds improve my vision and I'm sorry. More reverse-C crescent moons are spray-painted in white on the curtains and the walls.

Steely J reclines upon a bench seat torn from a truck. He's naked as a Greek statue. His eyes roll back and forth, white to black. Leeches, that's what my brain was trying to say. Leeches of varying length hang from his neck and his man-tits. One, swollen to the heftiness of a kid's arm, gloms onto his groin, its bulk flopped across his thigh like a nightmarish wang. Makes sense—femoral artery runs through there. A prime tap. He slurps from a mostly deflated bag of blood, his expression dreamy and fucked up. In with the fresh, right? Those are Mike's boots poking from behind the bench seat-couch, for sure.

Another stark-naked man rises from behind the couch and moves around the side. He kneels and gently detaches the leech from Steely's groin. Cheeks gleaming sweat, the stranger glances at me and smirks the dopey, amiable peasant smirk that has enthralled nightclub audiences since 19-fucking-74. He tenderly lays the leech on a towel and sticks it with a horse-needle syringe. Pulls the plunger and draws creamy black blood into the barrel.

Steely J rouses himself. His marble gaze rolls to me. "Hi, JV. What can I do for you?"

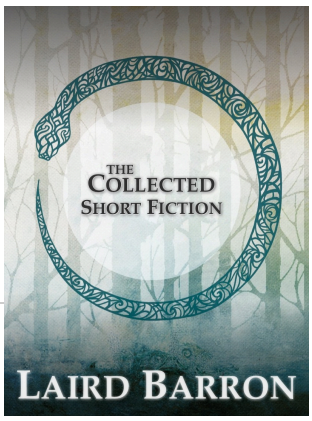
"Never mind."

I turn and head for the stairs. No keys for the car. Mike's motorcycle is beyond my capabilities. Town is a major hike for a girl with a bum leg. Too afraid to look over my shoulder. Swear there's heavy movement behind me, though. The universe and its bullet-fast molecules slow to a crawl.

First things first. I have to make it out of the house and call for help (that should be an interesting conversation). What are the odds I'll make it? Everybody knows that when seconds count, the state troopers are minutes away.

The TV volume kicks in. A laugh track swells and booms and fills my ears.

A Clutch



This version taken from *The Mammoth Book of Cthulhu*, 2016
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The man on the straw bed was done for, for sure. The young woman saw it plainly in his knotted muscles, heard it in his wet and ragged coughs. Moss lung, the wise women called the malady. Woodcutters, such as her uncle, risked it by hewing into fungi-encrusted cedars and firs. He gleamed with sweat. Three white hens clucked and fluffed themselves on their rack near his naked feet. The dog grumbled by the hearth, lost in a dream of the hunt.

"I am dying," her uncle said. "Come near. You took me in and gave me shelter. Allowed me to call you daughter… You are a precious ornament to my worthless life. O my sweet fair one! Scrubber of pots, burner of suppers, nurse to wounded forest creatures, radiant of heart, and pure of virtue!" He relapsed, head lolling.

The woman ignored him until she finished stoking the fire. She gathered her skirts and came to kneel at his side. She laid her hand upon his brow. Hot as a skillet. It wouldn't be long. Death whetted his culling knife out in the night gloom, ready to cut another soul off at the knees. She uncorked a bottle of whiskey and dribbled it over the man's scabrous lips until he gagged.

"My parents are dead these nine years. You have stood in their place. You have cut the wood and killed the wolves. You were my father's blood returned home at our darkest hour. O Uncle, of course you may call me daughter."

"Uncle. Yes, uncle. That was the story." The man tugged her sleeve. He seemed to gather his innermost reserves, for his expression smoothed and he spoke with a cold, uncharacteristic serenity. "The moon will roll like the bloody hub of a chariot through the branches of the crying sycamores. On nights such as this when the wind roars in the trees and the hearth coals

glow like the eyes of the Black Dog itself, you and the whiskey are a comfort. The cottage seems so rude, the candle glow of our souls so feeble, yet from your cheerful mien I draw courage. You resemble so much your mother now, Creator rest her.

"Gazing upon the accumulated trinkets, my bitten axes, the salted venison, the burlap and the barrels, storm chests and sealed urns, and the painting of your mother in her maidenhood, I am struck by how little there is to show for the generations of labor, for the missing thumb, the broken back, the lungs infested with devil's club spore. My drunkard's breath rasping, slower and slower.

"You are a good girl. Alas, I must tell you something nevertheless. My deathbed confession. Before you came along, I swore I'd be crisped in the fires of hell rather than sire offspring. You are dearer to my heart than any golden treasure. I should have kept my word."

"Sired off spring?" she said. "I don't take your meaning."

"I fear it will come to you."

When I was young, the Emperor's Highway ended a few leagues south of the Black Forest. Not like today where the road cleaves right through the middle and is lined with hostels and cheery inns thanks to the many reforms of the Empress, Creator bless and keep her from harm. No, in the olden times all you got were deer paths and howling darkness once you set foot off the porch. Men hunted in groups with flintlocks and spears and packs of hounds. Boar, bear, wolf, and worse, lurked. Even a few of the trees and some of the mossy boulders couldn't be trusted. Vile spirits were loose in the world. Hapless travelers vanished. Burly hunters, too. The children are what bothered everyone the most.

Ours has ever been a family of foresters—hunters, trappers, fellers, every one. My great-great-great grandfather Abernathy Ruark settled right here on the southern verge of the forest just after the shouting ended over the botched succession of King Theobald. Abernathy and his kin were a band of scofflaws and partisans who fled north when the revolt went sour, but half

the kingdoms were in the same pickle and a couple generations later all was forgiven, if not forgotten. Most of the wood folk returned to the cities once the Interregnum ended. The Ruarks stood fast and continued to carve a living from the banded oak and red walnut that southern lords and fat-bellied merchants hold so dear. We hunted the razorback boars and skinned the bears-that-speak-the-tongue-of-men. We will continue until the last of us has shuffled into the Hinterlands.

James Dandy was a friend in my youth. Yes, yes, the very highwayman and brigand who got himself hanged in King's Grove two winters gone. Last of his line. He grew up hard as nails. His parents were put to the ax and his brothers taken in chains to Sad Island. The Kouadoi would have bagged him, too, if he'd not squirreled away beneath a pile of dung until they tramped down to their ships and went back over the sea to their great ruined empire of caverns in Mount Thrall. That marked him, surely it did. Not a bad sort, but not a good one either, and now he's worm food with all the rest but yours truly.

Our misadventures were mainly his doing, or that of his cousins Manfred Hurt and Ike Lutz, both of whom had fled Westhold under a dark cloud. Man whores, the pair. Hurt convinced me to leave home and travel the kingdom in search of adventure. For a year I followed him around like a puppy, growing leaner and meaner with each passing week. We survived by laboring when there was labor, stealing pies from windowsills, whoring ourselves to monied folk, and so forth. I learned much of Dandy and his cousins. Much indeed.

I'd resigned myself to another dose of boot-leather soup when Dandy waved a handbill he'd snagged from the gutter. He proposed that we four should join a troop of other stout lads to answer the King's call for a march into the worst part of the Black Forest—The Fells. Aye, *The Fells, The Fells where the Jumping Jack dwells*… The Ministry of Coin wanted to scour the ruins of them old fallen holds that lie sunk into the muck and mire. There'd been a war, always a war, and it drained the treasury. Matters were so dire, palace servants had taken to melting royal dinnerware for the gold. Shameful.

Eadweard Mingy sat the throne in those days. King Mingy's mother died birthing him and he was raised by a witch from the Far East. The bat gave

him a taste for the black arts, maybe for the Dark itself. What a wretched court his must've been. Damned if that warlock Jon Foot didn't curry his favor all the years Mingy reigned. Jon Foot's folly is why I'll never step north of the Hunt River so long as I draw breath. Creator blast him.

After a roaring drunk, my friends and I got fresh tattoos and signed up with the Royal Army. They were pleased to snatch our service since we were accomplished woodsmen, or close enough for their uses. I hoped to see home again. Foolish boy was I.

Away we went—a full company of soldiers, laborers, potboys, and whores. One of a dozen such companies sent to spelunk for gold and precious relics and jewelry in the abandoned strongholds of the dead lords. Whispers were that the leaders of the expeditions reported not to the chancellery, but to Foot himself. He sought something other than mere gold or trinkets among the ruins.

Woe to us who discovered it for him.

We marched. North and north through the tilled and green lands around Great Port. North and north over the Tumwater and though the Wolverine Mountains a day's ride from the sea. North and north again until we passed through Sterling and entered the Black Forest in the region known as Cottonwood Vale for the cottonwood trees that line the River Fetch.

Our troop was led by Captain Vanger—well known throughout the army as a genuine hard ass. Vanger the Incorruptible, Vanger the Whip. Captain brooked no nonsense among the ranks, squaddie or civilian. Carried a blacksnake whip at his belt—as the men all do in Carlsbad, which is where he'd been brought bloody and screaming into this evil world. Loved that whip, Vanger did. Could snap a fly off a man's cheek at seven paces. Nobody was safe from it, either. That's how Manfred Hurt lost a chunk of his earlobe—old Incorruptible popped it like a cherry over some trifling infraction or because he didn't care for the look on the lad's face. No, it didn't teach Hurt much except to use a bit more stealth when fucking about. Only a bit.

North and north. Five days along the Left Hand Path where the canopy closes like an iron trap and sunbeams are wan. That way cannot be found anymore; it has overgrown and some sprats argue it only exists in the

addled minds of old men. Sprats with fewer teeth than before they say it to me, I aver.

Our scouts, a squad of Peloki warriors who wore topknots and red ochre war paint, had their chores cut out for them. You think our homely shack lies in the wilds, now, do you? Back then, the Left Hand was the only trail except what the animals made. Before the grand massacres that exterminated them once and for all, Malets and Hillmen skulked from the moors and hunted the forest. Not for game, mind you. Plenty of that in the highlands. The savages collected scalps from unwary southerners they caught with their breeches at half-mast.

None of us snot-noses had seen a genuine blue-belly, and despite the grim mutters among the veterans, we eagerly hoped to catch a glimpse. Some shit-eating fairy always lurks in the wings, waiting to grant an errant wish. Horses and donkeys went missing. Patrols spotted malevolent shadows flitting among the wagons and drove them away with torches and shouts. Finally, the Malets captured two lads on graveyard watch—snatched those unlucky boys smooth and quiet as weasels in the coop. Captain Vanger forbade any rescue mission into the deep undergrowth. He'd fought in the Battle of Thornwood and a dozen more on the Ynde subcontinent where tigers and their cults of worship roam the jungles. He knew the score. We marched onward and dusk came in a rich crimson blush through the foliage.

Deter Johansen and Marvin of Saltlick, those were their names. Healthy lads with good strong lungs. The boys' screams echoed for two nights. *Still* echo in my mind sometimes.

Three more days northwest and we forded the River Hunt and soon came upon a marsh of pale moss. Across this bog spanned a rough path of rotted planks. Here lay the beginning of The Fells. The savages harried us no more. Even they were wise enough to stay clear of that cursed land with its toads, spiders, and poison clouds from the Fifty Years Fires.

The trails crisscrossed the Fells like veins in the back of a crone's hand. Some called those paths The Gray Fingers, others, the Long Trail Winding. They branched every which way and as far as I know, wound on forever. Nobody can say who slapped them down in the first place. Perhaps it was the ancient kings or surveyors from the time of Argead of Enathia or his

usurper son. What I do know is the horses and donkeys hated them. The soldiers hated them, too, but to step off the planks was sure death. The mud had no bottom and would suck a man straight down to hell.

More days of stumble and slog. Mosquitoes blacked the nets at night. Bloodsuckers droned so loud, you couldn't hear the comrade snoring at you shoulder. Everybody had the shits. Lost four men and an entire string of horses to the bog water.

Autumn north of the Wolverine Mountains is dreary. Rain, muck, and leeches are what you're in for. Our camps became restless as the priests argued with the officers on the matter of performing rites sacred to the season. The men were not particularly thrilled that the Feast of the Dead fell upon us as we journeyed across a land laid low by sorcery. We feared to offend the Powers, yet we dreaded to commence ceremonies that by necessity draw the attention of the Dark. Captain Vanger compromised by doubling wine rations and permitting the chaplain to affright us with gruesome tales of how the inhabitants of the region had all gotten themselves exterminated. The chaplain painted with broad strokes; the men were bumpkins and nitty-gritty details would have been wasted.

On the next to last evening of autumn, the army camped atop a butte that heaved from the quagmire. West lay the ruins of Castle Warrant. Warrant's towers had crumbled and pieces of carved granite were embedded in the slope of the ridge it occupied. The vision of that night remains: a half dozen campfires in an encircling ring around the crown of our bluff, smoke rising into the grin of the skull moon; shattered battlements of the castle silhouetted against stars smashed so densely close together they formed bands of white and pink and smearing red. Gelid cold of the dark between the stars seeped across the void and stole my breath. I slept little.

At dawn, the soldiers dug earthworks. Captain Vanger hadn't lived to earn silver in his whiskers by playing the fool. No guarantee the blue-bellies wouldn't return in force or that the giant troglodytes of the deep swamp wouldn't boil forth to ravish the men and slaughter the animals. We civvies were divided into small parties overseen by squads of light infantry and dispatched along vectors of approach.

Manfred Hurt and me were sent to a breach in the southern curtain wall. Dandy and Lutz got sent elsewhere with other laborers. I never saw Lutz again. He fell into a crevice. Plop.

With picks, axes, and pry bars we spent the hours until dusk chopping through thickets and rolling aside boulders to reach the outer courtyard. Mossy walls loomed overhead. Hurt asked me if I knew of the Warrants and why their castle was so damnably massive. It went against my grain to admit any sort of book learning to the oafs of my acquaintance, thus I broke wind and shrugged. Da had taught me to play it close to the chest. On the other hand, *Ma* had taught me to read, semi-educated lady that she'd been before her logger-love swept her away from civilization. I could've instructed my chum that this fortress had once held the Northwest Marches against the Noord, those fathers of Malets and Grethungs and the Peloki, indeed, a hundred other tribes that fell to barbarism when the great *Empire Across the Sea* receded into itself. They called her Castle Warrant, yet she'd served as the steading of many a noble family until the Belfours lost her during the Interregnum.

I could've also mentioned the rumors of madness and depravity that possessed the Balfour family decades before the wars. My grandmother waited on the famed historian Grote of Lygos, and she read over his shoulder when he recorded the Red Treatise of Diebold and the North. She'd muttered of bloody orgies and foul sacraments that occurred in many of the north holds of a certain era. A vile cult infiltrated the ranks of the noble families, corrupting those fair knights to the ways of evil, and ultimately destroying them from within. *Traffickers with the Dark,* Gram said of the cultists. Were she yet living, she would not have approved of our traipsing about the ruined estates of those who'd perished in the thrall of wormy perversions.

No way could I speak any of this to loutish Hurt. He cursed the Crown in one breath and praised it with the next. Over a supper of boiled oats and salted pork, a strapping blacksmith's son named Henry Bane gripped my shoulder in his ham hock fist. "Don' go back in the morn," he says to me. I

ask why not and he says he beheld a crow peck the eye from a dying mule. The crow winged through the mist toward the western tower. Henry Bane took it for an ill omen. “Somethin’ right terrible will happen tomorrow,” he warned.

Fuck me running if that clod wasn’t dead right. The horror acted on a delay. It fastened upon me, aye. I finally understood, in the fullness of time and all that. More and more every night when I lie awake and listen to branches scratch the roof.

The courtyard sod had grown brittle. A royal engineer marked a spot and we yoked a team of mules to an auger and bored until we’d punched a hole into a vault. Me and a score of other lads descended on a series of lines knotted together. Down and down into the bowels of the earth with our picks and our lamps, hearts pitter-patting in our throats. We knew what to search for—coffers of jewelry and objects of art and ancient precious coins tarnished or bright, ceremonial blades begrimed by rust and verdigris, and panoplies of ancestral armor.

A grand cavern spread beneath the foundations of Castle Warrant. Stalactites oozed primordial slime. Shelves of granite and quartz blazed in the torchlight and fell away into utter blackness. A river clashed over distant rocks. Colonies of bats shrilled as they funneled into the abyss. Echoes traveled for leagues. Our party unhooked from the belays and clung to the damp spine of bedrock, followed its curve around to a landing and came to a flight of steps carved from the very stone itself. One case spiraled downward into the heart of the earth. The second case corkscrewed upward into the ruins of the castle proper. Our party split. I ventured up with nine comrades. A lonely feeling to watch the torches of our other fellows sink and dwindle to specks floating in oil, then snuffed.

In case you’re wondering, we never saw them again either.

Hurt and I took point. We climbed. Three hundred steps. Cracks every which way. *Deep* cracks stuffed with millipedes and pill bugs and wet, cancerous moss that smelled worse than the stuff in the swamp. Clung to

our boots and squelched like mud as did the pale mushrooms in their beds of hollowed step and splintered masonry. Earthquakes had tumbled stones from the vaulted roof. We scrambled over them, or went around, climbing, climbing, until at last we traveled through an archway into the basement.

Mind you, Castle Warrant stood for a millennium before the Interregnum. Emperor Innocent II himself ordered it built. As one of the great keeps of the North, Warrant contained smithies and barracks and stables to house lancers of diluted Xet stock who rode warhorses imported from the west. And dungeons. Many, many cells, many chambers of interrogation and woe. The rock was a honeycomb full of bones. An ossuary of damned souls. None of the prisoners of war were released during the final days before the Fires. Men, packed into cubbyholes, were left to gnaw one another like starved rats. Their skeletons moldered, locked in the eternal struggle.

Oh, how we tiptoed past the bones. Our shadows, tall and cruelly sharp, capered and spilled across the walls, mocking us. Grown men, with daggers and swords, we huddled together and held hands like children passing through that crypt. Halls crissed and crossed and doubled upon themselves. Sergeant Bakker broke out the chalk so we wouldn’t become lost forever in the warren.

The stairwell to the main floor had collapsed, confining our search for riches to those lower levels. I filled a burlap bag with coins. Brass, bronze, copper, reliefs worn smooth and shined to a glow I could see in the near dark. I swept all kinds of bullshit into that sack on the chance it would fetch a kind word from the Captain or at least spare me from the lash. Pewter cups and pewter plates, mostly cracked, but who gave a rip? Metal tongs and shattered candlesticks. Hurt rejoiced to find a trunk he thought would be jammed with valuables. Alas, mostly dirt and moldering cloth. He saved a moth-eaten tapestry that had grayed with antiquity.

Smoke hung in the fumy haze of our torch. More slimy lichen covered the walls. More slimy white mushrooms puffed beneath our tread. My breath huffed forth, and I sucked it and the torch smoke and the pall of the mushrooms in again and my thoughts revolved around themselves and my mood lightened even as a tear of desperation leaked from my eye. Intoxicated, dear daughter—no matter the source—is one way to pass the time in hell, should you ever need to know.

Hurt and I struck it rich in a dead end passage. I leaned against the wall to rest my sore backside. The stone crumbled and sloughed away and there in a queerly shaped cell, were two-dozen obsidian eggs stacked within the remnants of rotted crates. I'd seen their like once at a jeweler's shop in Victory City: hollow for the placing of a gem or prayer scroll while other others contained several smaller versions, each nested within its kin. Richies collected them in sets of fanciful design and jewelers crafted them in a drover's dozen lands.

I lifted one and turned it over. Different from the fabricated pieces I'd encountered, yet similar enough to give me hope of high value. Hard and edgy as the obsidian it resembled and seamless as any true egg. Something inside rattled the way a musician's gourd rattles.

"Why'n hell they got no latches?" Hurt said the way a child will of a Solfest upon discovering there's no gifts on the breakfast platter.

Surely the exotic nature of the eggs would fetch a fair coin. We'd get double rations at camp and that pleased me well enough to clear my foggy brain. I admit to a larcenous nature—knowing well that Hurt was too dumb to count, I socked away three of the eggs with the intention of smuggling them back to civilization and brokering a fortune of my own.

Hurt gathered our comrades while I set about fashioning a travois to transport the other goods we'd gathered. Soon the others arrived bearing their own dubious treasures. We stowed our spoils and proceeded for the surface. A train of scout ants dutifully transporting crumbs back to the colony.

Somehow, and maybe the brain-fog returned to beleaguer me, I lost the way. I'd taken the hind teat of our column as I dragged a carpet-load of junk treasure and no one wanted to trip over it in the gloom. One moment, Hurt trudged a couple paces ahead, and then I stubbed my toe on a loose stone and the men went around the corner, gone. Grunts and laughter and curses quit upon an instant as did the glare of their lamps and torches. The sudden stillness sobered me right smartly.

I shouted to them. My voice echoed through the labyrinth. It didn't rebound; it kept on going without answer. Then I felt in my pockets for flint and in moments ignited a brand from a sconce. A feeble reddish hue

flickered from that ancient pitch. Nowhere did I spy Sergeant Bakker's chalk marks. I thought of all those skeletons in their cells and the weight of the rock overhead, and of the mold and slime oozing in the cracks. Somewhere, wind moaned through a crevice. Dread coiled around me, sure as the noxious smoke.

Hold still, young Ruark. Someone whispered from the shadows. *Hold still, child. I'm almost with you.* My father's gruff voice, though he'd died several winters before, crushed beneath the felled trunk of an oak. Later, I became convinced it was my imagination, but in the moment, that coldly eager whisper was enough to get me moving. I abandoned the load and set forth with alacrity.

The hall wound this way and that and tightened until rudely carved rock dug into my shoulders. I squeezed through and stumbled into a cavern. Saints know how big—couldn't see far as the brand smoldered to a nub. Earth crumbled away from the toes of my boots into a pit. A foul breeze moaned up from that abyss and snuffed the dying flame.

Sapped of fight, I curled into a ball and fell asleep right there on the lip of oblivion. Chill and damp woke me. Didn't know what else to do, so I crawled. Crawled because I dared not risk tripping into sudden doom. I rested often; so thirsty I sucked at water seeping through rock, so hungry I licked the salty blood from my scabs, so weary I'd slip into dreams of the home cottage and Mother's honey porridge before the miserable cold roused me and I crept onward without direction or hope. The hunger became terrible. I sorted through my pockets, mad for the smallest crumb, and came across three of the obsidian eggs I'd stuffed in there and forgotten. I nearly pitched them away, until something stayed my hand.

Strangely, the jagged edges had smoothed and softened as unfired clay does over time. The shell curved, pliable as leather as I caressed it. In a daze, I obeyed a mindless command and cracked the egg and took its clabbered bounty in a gulp. The darkness was complete, thus I couldn't discern what yolky, blood-warm mass sludged down my throat, nor what fine bones and bits crunched between my teeth. The taste of it, horrible and delightful, a rancid ambrosia, smoldered in my guts. The next two went down the hatch with more ease. I heard my own grunts and gulps echoing from the rocks

around me. Horrible. And I licked my fingers and the ground for any drooling trace, and when I'd done, crawled onward.

The Dark looks after its own.

I found a chimney vent and wriggled my way until I popped out on the surface. I wept and rolled in that bog mud. You've seen the scars upon my back. You know how Captain Vanger greeted me upon my return to camp. After twenty lashes at the whipping post, they clapped me in the stocks for a night and chalked it off as a lesson learned. The Captain said I reminded him of one of his stupider nephews.

I wasn't the only sod who disappeared. Only one who vanished and then *came back*, though. Vanger ordered the company to withdraw. Apparently he took a gander at the obsidian eggs Hurt and the other lads hauled out of the depths and made the call right there. Loose talk spread through the ranks—Jon Foot wanted the eggs, had sent us into the wilderness for the very purposes of securing them, gold and gems be damned.

Damned.

The company made good time on its return journey. The weather stiffened and that sent the blue-bellies into their warrens for the cold season. On the eleventh sunset when we camped near the Thrush Meadows, I went forth to fetch wood for the bonfires. Dreadful pains stabbed through my innards. A foul, sickly sweat oozed from my entire body and made my clothes sodden. Phantasms of delirium cascaded through my mind. I bolted from the work part and squatted behind a log and voided my bowels.

Women groan about the agonies of giving birth. Well, lass, they have my profound sympathy. Shite and blood burst from me. I thought myself liable to split apart at the seams, as it were. Miracles and horrors! Three eggs dropped from me and lay in the muddy stench. A clutch of my very own. Each glistened in the muck; roughly the size of a hen's and translucent. Shrimplike embryos coiled in jelly. I recognized the black wisps of my hair, the imprint of my own coarse features, my own eye gone molten yellow

that flashed with unnatural awareness. Within a few heartbeats, the eggs crusted over, sealed by a jagged black shell.

Feral cunning overtook me, reduced me to an animal. I scooped handfuls of dirt and dead leaves over the abominations, then slipped back among my comrades who'd made merry at my cries of gastric distress. Life in the Legion is cruel.

Nightmares lashed me, surely as Vanger's whip. I was shorn of rest and sanity, condemned to drift as a voiceless spirit while doppelgangers assumed my life. Brazen, evilly grinning doubles doted upon by dear mother, my friends and colleagues. Each new dawn found me shaking in my bedroll. Only Jim Dandy and Hurt noted my ghastly pale countenance for I strove mightily to conceal the nature of my ills. The instinct that compelled me to bury the eggs also warned that I lived in the shadow of some obscene, circling terror. Should anyone discover my secret, I would be undone in spectacular fashion.

The moral I learned from this experience, is always heed your suspicious inner voice.

On the seventeenth evening Jon Foot himself materialized from the whirling smoke of our main bonfire. The dogs barked with insane fury and then cowered at his sandals. Two sentries pissed themselves. Most depictions of the warlock are exaggerated. Artists render him as a monster: red eyes, spiked horns, a death's head. Eight feet tall, razor talons and a lizard's tail. In private, he may strip his costume and resemble exactly thus a demon. However, when I met him, he appeared altogether ordinary. Softening into middle age, his hair receded and his belly rounded. Brown of eye and mildly spoken. His black cloak smelt of sulfur and he smiled too much. He smoked a clay pipe. That was the extent of his nefarious comport.

Soldiers vacated a tent on the edge of camp. Jon Foot quartered within. Shortly thereafter he summoned, one by one, those of us who'd ventured beneath Castle Warrant. The interviews were brief. Men emerged from their audiences none the worse for the wear, although none would speak of what had transpired nor meet the eyes of those who inquired. Vanger's lieutenants roamed among us and boxed the ears of those who pressed the point. Soon enough, the gossip stilled and the men fell into sulky routine.

My turn rolled round after midnight.

Jon Foot's tent fumed with smoke from an iron brazier and his pipe.

He reclined upon a stone chair carved into the likeness of a centipede rampant. It much resembled the one I am told existed at court in the Privy Council. The warlock took my measure with a long polite stare. He finished his cigarette and lighted another from the small flames of the brazier.

In that lull, I realized the sounds of camp were not muffled by the tent walls. Nay, we inhabited a bubble in a sea of silent darkness. Cozier than my terrifying span trapped in the caverns, yet much the same.

"Master Ruark, so good to make your acquaintance. I'm sure this will be the high-water mark of my day." He affected the cultured tones of a highborn. His politeness smacked of malice. Or, perhaps his tepid certainty and unwavering gaze preyed upon my guilt. His demeanor suggested that he knew everything about me all the way back to the rainy morn I dropped from Mama's womb. He laughed and said, "Yes, yes. I know much. *Much*, however, isn't the same as *all*. I cannot see what happened to you in the dim cellars of Henry Belfour. You were lost and now you are found. How does this happen?"

My intent was to mumble an inoffensive lie or three, to deflect and prevaricate as peasantry has treated with the rich since the beginning of time. Foot, black magician, must have cast a geas upon me, for matters took a bizarre turn.

"I got hungry and I ate three of them fucking eggs you're on about," I listened to myself say. Every other muscle in my body froze. I swayed, rooted in place.

"Damn. Captain Vanger counted the haul. A perfect set if not for the ones you abandoned. And the ones you devoured, alas."

"Too bad. They hit the spot."

"Thank you for your honesty, son." Jon Foot levitated to his feet. "Apparently you met an old friend of mine down there in the cellars."

"Aye, someone else was there. Whispering."

Jon Foot nodded wisely. "Others sought the Clutch. Bad ones. Ethan, Julie the Fifth, Carling… Phil Wary. Black sorcerers, each. It would be no matter

to disguise themselves and walk among your comrades. To divide and strike. You were befuddled and cut from the herd. Mere chance delivered you from doom… Did he speak to you? Surely, he did."

My mouth opened again, though I resisted mightily. "Aye. My father came upon me in the dark."

"Your *dead* father."

"As a doornail."

"This won't do. I'm sorry." He actually did seem a trifle melancholy. Then he took a small skinning knife from his pocket and sliced me from crotch to sternum. I cannot emphasize how disconcerting it is to watch in hapless wonder as the cut is assayed and one's intestines slop onto hard-packed dirt. What's worse? The warlock crouched, poking through the mess the way priests divine the future from pigeon entrails. The shock awakened my muscles. I regained sufficient control to stagger backward through the tent flaps.

Jon Foot watched me go, knife dripping in his hand. "Come back here, son. I want to hug the shit out of you!" He spread his arms and smiled with pure joy. His shadow against the wall coiled most unnaturally. It bristled with barbs.

Me and my train of guts paid no heed of his imprecation. Three steps took me across the threshold. I collapsed near a cook fire where soldiers just off watch gathered to warm themselves. The last moment I recalled of that particular life are their shouts, their expressions of panic and disgust. Sweet oblivion swept over me, and I was dead.

I revived, blanketed in slimy leaves, in the woods behind this very cottage. Naked and bloody and stinking, but whole. The pink flesh of my belly was without blemish, its cleaving wound had perfectly healed. They say that home always seems smaller when a man returns. This was the opposite. Trees loomed, the night stretched wider and deeper.

Guided by memory and habit, I emerged from the woods and knocked on the door. Ma swooned at the sight of her son, gone nearly two years. *More*

than surprise smote her. More than alarm at my gory visage. Far more, as I discovered upon glimpsing myself in yonder body mirror. Upon departing to seek my fortune in the wide world, I'd attained middling height and shorn my whiskers daily with Da's razor. Now, my form had reverted to that of a child of no more than five winters. My face had altered into a somewhat familiar stranger's. Partially my grown self, partially a changeling's. Mom would remark later that for a several moments she took me for her grandson.

Days of confusion followed. My thoughts buzzed. Waking proved difficult to separate from dreaming. I raved of centipede men and eternal darkness. Mother tended me as my strength and wits were gradually restored, and by the end of a week I'd grown fully into my father's old logging clothes. I began to feed myself. I shaved again. She gently inquired what I recalled of the time between my murder and awakening. What she wanted to know was if I'd witnessed the afterlife, if I'd gone there and dipped in a toe.

I shook my head and claimed ignorance of aught save a smooth, formless void. How could I tell her the truth? I recalled the formless dark. Indeed, I also remembered the licks of fire shooting through its depths, the black rolling back to reveal a deathly white, an iris of bones of men fused together unto eternity. How could I speak to her of the awesome cold, or of the death groans of hidden stars? How could I articulate the sense of folding into myself, of being trapped inside an egg, drawing sustenance from its yolk as a chick does?

I lacked the courage to describe a vision of rebirth wherein my eggshell cracked in half and I floated upon a woodland stream near a summer twilight. Willows entangled themselves against a red sky. Other reborn souls rode the current in their shells. They cried to one another, mewling as babes. Bitterns jigged between the reeds, their tarnished bills poised for the killing stroke. The towering birds pecked and stabbed at tiny prey and swallowed piteous shrieks of my fellow travelers. I met the glaring, avaricious eye of fate as it plunged its bill toward me and the red sky cracked as the eggshell had, and tarry black spilled forth instead of light. I drowned in blood, not water.

My weary mother deserved a fairer tale. All mothers do. Thus, I spun a pretty yarn about warmth and quiet and the peace of the womb. I had

changed enough from the son she bore and raised that she had little choice but to accept the lies as one might from a fresh-faced stranger. Wearing a new face and armed with bitter experience, my gift for fabrication was much improved. Despite the uncanniness of the situation, it proved easier for her than I might've suspected. We were able to make a fresh slate of it.

As the doldrums evaporated, I realized the starkness of Mom's situation. Since Dad's untimely demise and my departure, she'd become haggard and mournful. Our ancestral hut had gone to wrack and ruin. Where had my younger brother Marlon gone? Four summers my junior and a forester in the making, I assumed his absence meant he was afield cutting wood or away at the market in King's Grove. Mom covered her face and wept. The gods demanded balance—three nights before my return, Marlon vanished while logging a nearby hillside. He'd been in the company of fellow woodcutters. They searched for him in vain. The men concluded he'd run afoul of wolves, which were particularly ravenous of late.

Immediately, I dressed in my father's work clothes, gathered meager supplies, and set forth with his bearded ax slung across my back. The hillside wasn't far. I supped with the loggers who toiled there. These were men slightly younger than myself alongside whom I'd labored and feasted in days gone by. None recognized my countenance, although each embraced me as a Ruark for I bore an unerring stamp of the family bloodline. I introduced myself as a traveling cousin and was thus reborn full and true. Solved my problem with the Legion. The functionaries hate it when folks they've killed turn up alive and well. Their foreman told me how Marlon walked into the bushes and vanished. He didn't figure I'd have any better luck turning up a corpse, but gods be with me in my task.

I sought my brother high and low. Scoured the nearby hills and hollows. Finally, I kicked over a pile of human bones deep in a thicket. Couldn't tell whether they belonged to him or not—hacked and charred too badly. Reminded me of something. I buried the bones and said a few words in case the gods were watching.

Reinvention and a newfound loathing for travel served me well. I put my faith in the fates, relegated miseries to the past, and set to work. Strong whiskey and back-breaking labor kept me on the straight path and with scant time for contemplation on matters best left undisturbed.

Soon, I became an accomplished logger and attracted a crew of strapping lads. As you can see, riches didn't follow. Nonetheless, we did well enough. I was content to dwell here in this cottage alone for a score of years. Over the years, I sought out Dandy, Hurt, and the others and introduced myself under this new identity. Never did I choose to wander, however. Nor did I pine for the company of a wife. Not until I met your mother in King's Grove by happy accident. Charm, wit, beauty. Youth! Too good for a woodcutter with white in his mane and sap in his beard, I vow. She smote me with a bat of her lashes. Long after our honeymoon, I harbored the notion she'd merely taken pity on a poor boy. In hindsight, it's more likely she fled demons of her own. City life is as treacherous as any bad stretch of the forest. Eventually you came along, my dear, our only child.

Despite an abundance of joy, I occasionally dreamed of death and of things worse than death.

The second time I died was on a midsummer's night, nine years gone. Like my father before me, I chopped a tree and it corkscrewed beyond control and crushed me to jelly. You and your mother wept. Then she disappeared. I imagine how it went—a strangled cry jolted you from nightmares. Though you desperately searched this hut, though you combed the yard and the woods, you discovered nary hide nor hair of her. You collapsed near the hearth ashes in despair. Calamity upon calamity! What would become of you?

But three nights later you opened this door to soft knocking and found me, naked and delirious upon your step. I claimed to be your uncle. What choice did you have other than accept providence? Parents dead or missing. No man to protect you, no man to provide. A girl alone in the wood is easy prey for beasts. Besides, there could be no question of our kinship. I am inalienably a Ruark. Sad to say I am also a wee bit more than that.

This second death had traversed a similar arc to the first. I envisioned an abyss of terrible cold and darkness; I floated a stream as a fingerling babe

upon a half shell and was devoured alive by bitterns. I clawed back into this world in the bog just yonder. The only real difference being my transformation from toddler to graybeard occurred as I stumbled along the path to your door. You accepted me and my hastily contrived tale of prodigal uncle, home at last. Robbers stripped me and left me beaten bloody. By the grace of the gods had I managed to reach sanctuary…

The moment I learned of your mother's disappearance, I finally possessed an inkling of the horrible nature of the black eggs, if not their unholy provenance. Once a man departs the mortal realm he can only be restored by the subtraction of another soul. Rebirth via the egg claimed the flesh and blood, the very consciousness, of those whom I cherished. My suspicions were confirmed when I located her skeleton in the blackberry tangles that border the meadow. My wails of anguish scattered birds from the trees. A dark cloud blotted the sun and rain lashed the field.

Full to the craw with dread, I went to the bog that twice vomited me forth and beheld the remnants of the obsidian eggs. Animals steer well clear of that plot. Pieces of broken shell lay there, perfectly preserved. After a bit of rooting around the bed of decayed leaves and mossy loam, I uncovered the third egg. It nestled in a patch of muck, glittering like a flinty gemstone prized free of the Dark Lord's own tiara.

Gods help me, I intended to destroy the egg lest you one day feed its unnatural hunger. I failed. Each time I bore the egg away, it slipped from my pocket and reappeared in the bog by some malignant supernatural trickery. I kicked it, smashed it with my ax, piled tinder wood atop and set it ablaze. All useless; no measure so much as scratched the gods damned egg. I even resorted to prayer, if you can imagine your old man upon his knees, yammering to the invisible powers with the zeal of a penitent. What a farce.

Despite these theatrics, a small voice in my head was pleased. My soul and my thoughts are corrupted, you see. To eat of the black egg is to be damned.

Both times I've rowed back from the abyss, my essence mingled and consumed an innocent sacrificial soul. In the process, some essential piece of my own being was replaced. Cold and darkness seeped into my bones. That cruelly selfish portion bid me to quit my attempts to destroy the egg and speak of it no more. It promised to ease my nightmares, it swore I

would forget, but only if I played the fool, the supplicant. To my everlasting shame, I heeded this whisper. Grateful as a dog for the whipping to end.

Light burn me, I've tried to be a good father. Once in a blue moon, I ignored my instincts and summoned the courage to perform one last valorous deed before the bell tolls an accounting. Perhaps Jon Foot's dark magic could reverse this damnation. Too bad he's dead and beyond the reach of all men. The names he mentioned—Julie, Ethan, Phil Wary—are mysteries that confound solution. With rare exceptions, sorcerers tend to keep a low profile.

There have been times, such as last night, fortified by loneliness for your mother, or by the powerful spirit of the jug, that I crept out to the bog and sat cross-legged in the moss and schemed of ways to slip this noose around our necks. Generally though, it's much easier to live the life of a garrulous drunkard and cheerfully wait for fate to run its course. Yes, so much easier to not dream of bitterns pecking my eyes and balls for eternity.

Soon, I shall die. Then, I shall return and *you* will be gone. You will vanish as my brother and your mother did. After you, there is no one. I will reside here, an unfamiliar ghost of myself, alone.

He slumped against his pillow. The effort of reciting his tale of woe had drained the man and turned his flesh a chalky white. Bruises around his eyes and nostrils lent him the aspect of a corpse about to endure ritual mummification. He coughed. Blood speckled his beard.

The woman held his hand. The fire had burnt low, casting a shadow across her face. She said, "Uncle, I mean, Da, that was an amazing story. Especially the part about Jon Foot. Did you really meet him? Was he so very ordinary? Surely, you never met him."

"Merciful… Did you listen to a word?"

"You are a sweet, confused sod. Fret not over damnation nor curses, nor phantoms. *I* ate the egg."

"You what?"

"*We* ate the egg, to speak true. Did you suppose I slept through your blundering around the cottage at all hours? What matter to follow you? And what matter, after you'd come and gone, to examine the item you coveted in your fevered state? A great white goose egg. Pristine as snow awaiting my eager hands to pluck it from the nest. Pluck it I did; *plop* into my apron and borne home in a trice."

"No." Horror twisted his countenance. He covered his mouth against a deeper, ripping cough, and blood came freely between his fingers. "Oh, daughter. There are no geese here. No geese. *Nothing* lives in the bog."

"Our luck was good," she said with placid determination. "The omelet we enjoyed this morning contained rich red yolk and a lump of half-formed gosling to boot. Praise to the Light. It is the first meat we've enjoyed since you took ill."

He moaned and tossed his head in terrible negation. The woman stroked his brow. She soothed him until he ceased thrashing. His breathing slowed. After a long while it stopped. She squeezed his hand. How sad it was to lose one's sanity with age as one lost his or her teeth.

She wiped her eyes and composed herself. There were practical matters to attend, such as acquiring a husband to chop wood and hunt game and run off the ever-lurking bandits. Pickings were slim in this neck of the woods, so she'd long delayed accepting a suitor. Now she feared it would come down to one of the inbred Slawson brothers or a gap-toothed hick from among the Smyths who dwelt a couple of hollows over…

The dog growled. His mangy fur stiffened until he was more porcupine than mutt. The woman told him to be still and then the shake roof peeled away with a grinding clatter. The stars were gone, replaced by a sky that glowed hellish red. A bittern, as tall and wide as a windmill, warbled mightily and slithered its long neck and broadsword of a bill through the gap and skewered the man's corpse, lifted him on high, and flicked him back down its throat. A second bird echoed the hunting cry and muscled in, its smooth dark eye glinting with the murderous crimson light of the firmament.

"Well, shit," the woman said. The black bill unhinged as it plunged to take her.

Gradually the swollen red light dimmed and stars sprinkled the heavens. The dog waited until he hadn’t heard any more screams or those piss-inducing bird cries for a while. He crept from beneath a table and sniffed around warily. Cold hearth, empty beds, no humans but for their fading scents. Tragic, although the mongrel had only wandered into the yard that spring. Scraps were less than plentiful of late, and the woodcutter had been free with his hobnail boot after a few drinks, so the dog wasn’t overly invested in the arrangement.

He jumped through the open window and trotted away into the night.

Oblivion Mode

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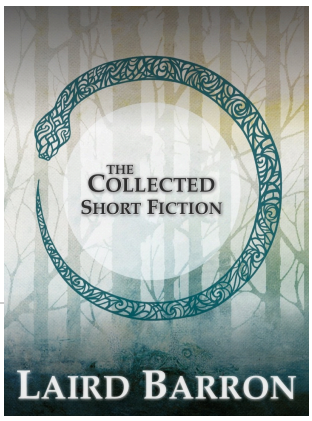


Somewhere in the Headsman Mountains

A music box played the up-tempo notes of a murder ballad.

Far from welcoming lands, the company built a campfire and watched it burn low. A young woman in antique scale armor, two old men (one in mismatched leathers, the other in buckskins), a grizzled dog, and an equally grizzled horse. The animals were massive and their eyes expressed extraordinary intelligence. Both would have preferred retirement on a farm. The girl in the antique armor had shortchanged the animals on that count—shanghaied them with sweet talk and an appeal to their bellicose nature.

Night birds drifted, crying, through the mists in the valley. Wolves harmonized upon a hidden ridge. The charger stamped his hooves, unhappy because the howls were not wolf howls but rather the howls of bestial men in wolf skins. Shadows from the pine forest tattooed a boulder here, a swath of wildflowers there. Fistfuls of cold-salt stars hung upon the immortal darkness. The breeze tasted faintly of snow and strongly of green needles and dirt and the smoke of the fire.

“Devil moon came on Thor’s Day.” The vagrant plunked a Stradivarius guitar in accompaniment to the woman’s music box. He’d acquired the guitar from a king for services rendered. His blanket was patched with peace signs and anarchy symbols that would’ve seen him drawn and quartered under the reign of the previous monarchy. “First night in a century for one to rise on Thor’s Day … I slept through its ascent in the unfinished basement of a mill. Saw it anyway, in a dream. A blazing white coin streaked with a bloody fingerprint. You and I didn’t know each other then.”

To the vagrant’s left, the lanky, gray-bearded man in buckskins sharpened a tomahawk. He glanced where the waning gibbous moon fumed behind a peak long-gone tribes called Old Woman’s Nose. He scowled.

Lochinvar shut the small music box, sealing away the crystal shrike perched in the branches of a crystal thorn tree. On Thor’s Day, she too had hidden from the waxing blood moon, yet seen it nonetheless. She’d covered her face with both gauntleted hands while the wind moaned outside her burrow in the base of a dead tree. Her three-body blade, Rebuke, absorbed the hell light. The sword had glimmered like a shorn tusk where it lay across her bedroll while the music box had played an eerie dirge of its own accord.

Mantooth had protectively curled his furry bulk against her. Flint, war-tempered stallion, remained placid, eyes shielded by a burlap sack. Bats had skated across the moon’s grinning skull. Flint merely swished his tail at the distant ululating skreeee. Several nights gone by and still ruddy, Luna burned frightful as the glare of a murderous drunk, but possessed no power to fully corrupt the minds of men or animals.

Too soon a thought.

Mantooth growled. The canopy rustled. A dense shadow swayed upside down from a pine branch. The branch sagged dangerously.

“Hullo, kids,” the giant vampire bat lisped through his fangs. His disproportionately tiny red eyes twinkled. Like Mantooth the war dog and Flint the charger, the bat descended from an Ur bloodline. He comprehended the tongues of men and could speak them when he wished. Sages claimed Fleetwood was youngest of a coven led by the infamous Leonora and Ennis Shriek. Neither of these worthies had shown hide or hair since the winter of ’22. Naturalists and garrison commanders speculated Fleetwood was the last of that cruel and violent lineage.

“Good evening, Fleetwood,” Lochinvar said. “Flap on over by the fire. I might have an apple in my rucksack.” She stretched and laid her hand on Rebuke. The hilt was wrapped in cured human skin; the pommel an agate shaped by earth’s own grinding pressure into a lumpen death’s head. Each kill was said to widen the grin ever so slightly.

“An apple?” Fleetwood said. “Wrong species, babe. I ain’t here for a snack. Takin’ stock, takin’ names.”

“Bloodsucking spy.” Mantooth’s voice rumbled from his thick chest as if he’d swallowed gravel for dinner. The dog grinned jaggedly. His long fur gleamed silver at the tips. Scarred, arthritic, and closer to the grave than not, in that moment he was almost his erstwhile dire self again—killer of knights, slayer of horses, fucker of every bitch in the kennel. “I bite you, bloodsucker. I snap and tear.”

Flint nickered. “I stamp your skull.” He pawed a divot into the earth with an iron-shod hoof.

Fleetwood peered through a fold of his wing. “Who have I spied trespassin’ in the Master’s domain? Damned Karl Lochinvar and a ragtag posse. Mantooth, alpha among yappin’ curs. Then we have the broke-down nag, Flint. They woulda put you to stud except for the unfortunate detail you don’t have much lead in the pencil, hey? Mr. Bowie, sorry to see you mixed up in this business—guidin’ the tinhorns, I expect. Been a while and Karl must’ve forgotten the way. Besotted hobo, I don’t know you, although your reek will be difficult to forget …”

“Marion Hand, at yer service, vermin,” the vagrant tipped back the brim of his floppy hat and struck a discordant twang on his guitar.

“Marion Hand, ex-Royal Dragoon of the disgraced Ninth Regiment?”

“Aye.” Plunk!

“Marion Hand, ex-mancatcher for the corrupt and discredited Continental Agency?”

Plunk! Plunk!

“Marion Hand, asshole buddy of Jon Foot, the Emperor’s warlock in exile?”

Plunk! Plunk! Twang!

“Ah. Pleasure to make your acquaintance after these many years, Mr. Hand. The low life suits you.”

Lochinvar said to Fleetwood, “We are on our way over the pass. You’ve no cause to plague us.”

“The Northern Waste lies yonder. None civilized or sane go there.”

Hand laughed. “Civilized? Sane? This company is oh for two in those departments, if you hadn’t already noticed.”

“Oh, my deceitful friends, the world has moved on and erased the villages from these hills. There is only the Master’s abode within many leagues. Come to him if you dare, sweetmeats. I’ll laugh as he carves your guts—”

Bowie flung his tomahawk. It whickered end over end and thudded into Fleetwood. The bat shrieked and hurtled upward and was gone with a thrashing of sundered branches.

“Well cast,” Hand said. He strummed a merry riff, basically in tune.

“Gods damn it,” Bowie said. “That was my grandmother’s favorite axe.”

The Melancholies of Baron Need

Gazed through tinted lenses, the sunset is a livid stripe around a bloody puncture. Shapes of the human and animal kingdoms are yours to assume since you have none of your own. Tomes chock-full of woodcut images of horrors from folklore delight you. Your preferred form is an exaggerated and more vivid iteration of a long-gone noble whom everyone hated and feared. If his enemies could only see him now. You stand tall as a rearing cave bear. Rib-bone white, robed in regal tatters, your aspect is a stained-glass etching of Satan. Your icepick smile causes peasant lasses to drop their knickers. Your snarl sends maddened songbirds murmuring in search of eyes to peck. Yet you are merely a mote. A hologram lent human substance to mask the inhuman truth. You are…

…a long tooth that sinks into a jugular.

…a talon that plucks away the skin and lays bare frailty and woe.

…a sucking tendril that twines around a fearful heart. Lub-a-dub, bud-a-bul.

…a siphon that draws blood and carries it into darkness.

You lap and lap with a rough tongue. You gulp a river and let it drain into the pit at your center. Black pit, black Niagara Falls. You drink, and drink. The river pours through you and spills into an estuary on the dagger edge of

nothingness. It’s never enough, all that hot blood. The something larger that you are a part of is insatiable and would love to lick out the sun. Someday it might.

Little Lochinvar

Karla Lochinvar (known as Karl since she was knee-high to a… et cetera) determined herself a pessimist at the age of eight, the winter before she first met Smirking Jaye. Experience seldom failed to validate her lack of optimism. An only child like Mom before her. Mom remarked that replicating once with a slight variation was sufficient. A little brother would have been nice. Later, as an adult, Karl Lochinvar reminded herself the kid would likely be dead too, or would have suffered a fate worse than, so better to have never been born.

Dad was a hunter in an age of scarcity. He also played flute with a traveling troupe (which is how he met and knocked Mom up). Mom kept the home fires burning. She taught Lochinvar letters (and some folks, namely enemies, warrant this was a tragic mistake) and let her read from the histories, philosophical treatises, and romances she’d inherited from Grandmother on Dad’s side. Grandmother, albeit merely a handmaiden to a duchess, had been a learned woman and a great influence upon young Karl.

Her parents got on well enough despite Dad’s rambling, whoring ways. When he returned to burrow in for the winter everybody was happy. Mom and Dad were happy, anyhow. Their daughter’s disposition proved complicated.

Assiduously cheerful of comport, Lochinvar possessed secret melancholy depths. She waxed nihilistic in her diary. The fix is in, obviously. We chase the mechanical coney around and around the track until we fall, one by one. A man in a tweed cap and a tweed jacket strolls by with a blunderbuss and puts a Hornady ball through our brains. The man in the tweed cap occasionally wears an immaculate white anorak, or an immaculate black robe with a cowl, or a cassock. His eyes are the eyes of your father or your mother, or a grandparent you are desperate to impress. He is Death and a friend.

Ad infinitum. Whence her bitterness? She came by it honestly, in fact. Osmosis.

Work is the curse of the drinking man, Dad said as he pulled his boots on at sunrise. Black boots. Hard as antlers. Come late winter and the deep snows, he switched to mukluks. You can easily sneak up on hapless prey if you wear mukluks. He was full of received wisdom and rotgut. Sooner war, sooner peace. Once begun is half done. Take the bull by the horns. Don't let your alligator mouth overrun your canary ass.

Dad brawled at the tavern (and usually won despite his lack of brawn). He also frequently tangled with the bureaucracy. In days gone by he'd belonged to the wrong political guilds. Latter days brought new problems. Something about a ring of poachers operating near the Baron's forest reserve. Warden Snidely swung by the house once a week and had tea with him in the den. The cop smelled of heavy musk. He wore pastel shirts under his parka—sometimes yellow, sometimes salmon—wool pants, and fancy, fur-trimmed boots. A homespun ensemble, and Lochinvar fantasized about the warden's wife and the kind of woman she might be.

Warden Snidely shone soft as dusk. His dark hair gleamed in ringlets. Lochinvar couldn't figure the man's exact age. His demeanor betrayed no clues. He scratched notes in a ferret-skin notebook while he talked to Dad and sipped the tea Mom brought. Mom gave him the cheap leaves. Lochinvar harbored the suspicion she'd screwed him. A loyal woman would do anything to keep her man out of Shank's Hostel.

The Lochinvar household plastered on smiles and made nice when Johnny Law came around, until one day he arrived with another man in tow.

Mom gripped Dad's arm and whispered, "That's Smirking Jaye. Maybe we shouldn't let 'em in." Dad had to let them inside, and he did with a big friendly grin. He tucked a jawbone knife into his belt, though.

Lochinvar knew of this Smirking Jaye fellow who served the Baron as major-domo. The Baron exhibited a penchant for nubile girls and often sent his servant to collect them, or so went the fearful gossip among every milkmaid within thirty leagues. Hair shorn in a tonsure, Smirking Jaye was round faced and thick, though not quite fat. He didn't smirk; point of fact, he was expressionless as a death mask. He wore a mink coat and

lederhosen. His gloves were fancy and so were his codpiece and boots. A talisman of the Broken Ouroboros done in black iron swung from his neck. It was difficult to expect anything other than evil from such a man. The Lochinvar family dog, Orlando, a mighty bastard of a wolfhound, didn't favor Smirking Jaye one teeny bit. Orlando snarled and foamed at the muzzle until Dad locked the brute in his kennel.

Tea in the den, as usual. Karl Lochinvar witnessed the conference from a cubby concealed behind a moth-eaten wall hanging.

Most of the conversation eluded her comprehension except for mention of poaching and veiled references to the vulnerability of children. An argument escalated. Voices were raised. Smirking Jaye removed his left glove with theatrical leisure and unveiled a skeletal hand. The hand of a drowned sailor, chipped free of some ancient reef—slimy and sharp as an eel tooth. He wagged his bony fingers menacingly. Dad drew his knife and busted a move (and gods, he was fast), but Smirking Jaye ignored repeated stabs as he seized Mr. Lochinvar's throat and twisted. Dad's head popped free in a spray of blood like a stubborn bush uprooted. Warden Snidely's horrified expression suggested even he hadn't seen that coming.

Mom dropped a plate of cookies. She screamed. And what a scream: grief, rage, and fear in an unholy combination. Shutters blasted from windows and the hearth imploded and took away most of the roof. Warden Snidely and Smirking Jaye disappeared. They left human-shaped cutouts blasted through the wall. Karl Lochinvar took a blow from flying debris and had a long nap. She dreamed of romping the fields with Orlando in the spring. The hound dug into the rubble and licked her face until she came back to the awful reality of her new world.

Mom collected Dad and burned his corpse atop the splintered timbers of their cabin. She stood in the heart of the conflagration. Her clothes were eaten by flames. The flesh of her right shoulder and thigh curled and blackened. Blood dripped and sizzled. Strips of silvery mesh peeked through. Her blue eye popped. The socket wept a dull orange glare.

She regarded her daughter and said in a metallic voice, "There are things you do not know about your father. He contained multitudes. We have kept much from you, my girl. I wonder if it is too late to rectify the matter …"

The whole scene felt familiar; a living echo of a dream Karl Lochinvar had as a toddler. The echo reverberated back farther and farther until the terror of it caused the child to avert her gaze.

After the fires banked, Mrs. Lochinvar dressed her sobbing daughter in furs and a hat and tucked a sack of vittles and a knife into her belt. There was nothing else left after that. “Go away from here.” She wiped snot from the girl’s chin and pressed a scrap of vellum into her pocket. “Follow this map. Dig beneath the third standing stone, east of the wave-a-bit tree. My initials are carved near the top of the stone. Dig and dig, my sweet girl—deep as a grave, maybe a bit more. Your legacy awaits.”

“What’s my legacy, Mama?”

“A legacy is an inheritance.”

“Yes, Mama. What’s mine?”

“Oh. You have a couple of choices, sweetie. Get married, milk goats, knead dough, and give birth to eleven kids. Or, get paid to ride around the countryside cleaving bad men from asshole to appetite with a sword.”

“Okay, Mama.”

Mrs. Lochinvar, naked as Lady Godiva, dragged Smirking Jaye by the ankle up the mountain toward Castle Blood. Smirking Jaye’s arms flopped and his head bounced against the rocks. Faithful Orlando scouted ahead. Mom, standing taller and more powerful than her wont, glanced back and winked. Her disfigured face shone radiant with terrible joy.

A good thing that pessimist philosophy had metastasized as a steely nugget of pragmatism at the core of Lochinvar’s emotional spectrum. She resisted competing urges to follow her mother or curl next to the fire. Either were certain death. Her remaining option represented slightly less than certain death. She lowered her head and trudged into the wilderness.

Wolves from the Black Forest shadowed her. Ravens from the Black Forest circled overhead. Every rock and tree stump suggested a lurking Peloki raider or Malet outrider. She quickly drank her meager supply of water and devoured the dried meat. Each night she curled in her furs and sobbed until nightmares swept her into their evil embrace.

While the journey wasn’t exactly a picnic, she’d hunted with Dad plenty and his tutelage lent her the grit to persist. On the fourth morning she came upon a wind-scoured hill that overlooked a frozen, nameless river. A scary tree guarded the summit of the hill. This tree was ringed by majestic standing stones Malet tribes had set in place millennia prior. Ice and snow kept wave-a-bit trees dormant. Its blisters oozed red sap that steamed and glaciated between exposed roots. The murderous tree barely rustled a vine as Lochinvar approached her X-marks-the-spot. She gave it a rude arm gesture of defiance anyway.

Per her mother’s instructions, she knelt in the shadow of the third stone east of the tree. The stone’s petroglyphs had worn to the impression of a closed eye incised at a downward angle. She fashioned a spade from a shard of flint. She dug into the cold, dead earth until the edge thunked against something even harder and less yielding than rock. Her hands bled where the flint sliced through her fox-hide mittens, yet she continued to excavate until a swath of metal spread before her.

The carved eye in the monolith reacted to her efforts. It spiraled open and gazed upon Lochinvar with a beam of orange light. She cried out and scrambled backward. A mouth dissolved through the stone and issued a cloud of black, stinging gnats. The gnats hummed a song of small violence as they burrowed into her ears and eyes. She inhaled and the rest found their way inside.

A voice that sounded much like Mom’s strange metallic voice said, Genetic match verified. Omega protocol initiated. Dematerialization imminent. The earth crumbled and Lochinvar plunged into a pit. She watched the patch of sky shrink and vanish, leaving her to fall and fall as the gnats rearranged her from the inside. Her body dissolved, her thoughts scattered, and her various particles went down a funnel that elongated into the frigid depths of galactic space and unto the precarious verge of the Great Dark.

It got a lot worse before it got better. It never got better, not really.

Baron Need and the Soul Grinder

In some parts of the world, your kind are referred to as vampires. This is because humans prefer to sugarcoat bad news. Vampirism is an acceptable

horror, romanticized as a metaphor for sexual repression. As usual, the truth is worse. Elsewhere, learned men whisper, Nosferatu. South, it's Lamia or Vorvolakas. Tropical cultures fear the Penanggalan, and with justification—once that barbed tongue starts wriggling up the ass, it doesn't stop until it has perforated the liver. Indeed, such creatures exist, and each is awful in its own special way. Some of these might be considered your ill-gotten offspring. However, none of them are quite as dreadful as you seven lords, subject of the original campfire legends and boogeymen tales.

Lords Dig, Clutch, and Dark haven't shown themselves since the Interregnum. Possibly they were destroyed, although you remain skeptical. Dr. Slake dwells in the utter North in a cave carpeted with bones of men and beasts. He is feted by processions of rosy-cheeked lads and lasses sent by jarls desperate to protect their humble villages from slaughter. Mr. Speck inhabits the Royal Catacombs of the Imperial City and has done so before slaves heaved its founding stones into place. No shortage of effete, powdered twats that close to court—Mr. Speck dines in luxury. How he hasn't withered from anemia from thin gruel is another question. Mr. Batten lurks high in the Andalusians upon a desolate crag. His is the guise of a leprous sphinx whose visage has eroded and cracked. He promises unwary travelers safe passage if they can answer a riddle. Like all of you, Mr. Batten is a dirty liar.

Your mind is far away with your scattered brethren as you cynically appraise the double dozen peasants chained to the floor of the dungeon. Tribute from several baronets, offal smokers who aren't a spot on their haughty forefathers.

Water drips. Cold wind whistles through flues in chimney rock. Peasant eyes roll white with terror. The peasants stink of animal sweat and vintages of piss. They gibber and supplicate their gods, their saints, their ancestors. Nary a buxom, full-blooded maiden among these mongrels. Nor a village hero of steely thew and steelier resolve; not even a blacksmith's son bulging with raw potential while innocent of his destiny. This collection is chaff; the beaks, assholes, and gristle that make up processed sausage peddled by back-alley hucksters. Flesh and blood are not all the same, as qualities of light and dark are not all the same. The inferiority of this tribute suggests a

shift in the balance of power. A corrective action may become necessary if it’s not too late.

You pluck the least smelly and emaciated of the lot, lift her high, kicking and squirming, and decant her pulp into your up-tilted mouth. This semi-ripe milkmaid is your payment as trustee of the appetite of immortal darkness. You cast aside desiccated scraps. The rest of the mewling livestock is property of that greater self of which you exist as an anthropomorphic facsimile, a projection of false life. Predictably, the peasants are distressed by the milkmaid’s exsanguination. They emit a chorus of howls and redouble their prayers and imprecations. The ritual is as tedious as Time itself.

Brawny Peloki wildmen in executioner hoods crank a windlass. A section of worked stone grinds upward. Petroglyphs realign as seals are broken. The siren song of infinite blackness pierces your mind. It begins instantly because it never ceases. Your miserable tumor of a heart quickens to be so near its Maker (unMaker?). Oh, the perverse irony to have birthed from such a devourer. You cover your ears—not to muffle the impending carnage, certainly not! Nay, you seek to block the call of the dark, to turn away the colloidal blots of memory of your previous unlife. Pleasurable agony suffuses you as the soundless song keens.

A wall of quartz reflects bits of lamplight, and at its heart a jagged crimson hole that could be plugged by a large man’s fist. The hole expands slightly as the Void inhales the scents of warmth and fear. A dozen smaller holes materialize as a helix orbiting the larger opening. Each emits music; each bubbles with the radiation of superheated infinity. The stomach acids of primal reality smoke as they carve channels into the crystal.

The celestial song ascends, becomes a shrill fluting that rises and rises to a prolonged shriek. This shriek encroaches the mortal spectrum and causes sphincters to loosen. Gravity shifts sideways and increases dramatically. One by one, villagers are wrenched free of their bonds (trailing shorn limbs and yolks of viscera) as if caught in the invisible coils of a cyclone. Bodies smack the wall and hang pinioned. Momentarily. The pull of the Void is irresistible. They are sucked into the crystal aperture, inch by skin-shucking, bone-crunching inch. Living meat fed through an abattoir grinder. Screams dwindle and cease. Leftover puddles go wicked into the black hole

and leave the dungeon floor spotless as a licked platter. At last your servitors let crash down the warding gate. The men hang their heads. Sobs escape their hoods.

For once, it's hard not to empathize with the puling mortals. This whole messy process would be so much damned easier if the notch between the mortal plane and the Great Dark was a smidgeon wider. Ironically, Mr. Speck presides over a chasm in the earth; Mr. Slake is projected from a pit wide enough to gulp an elephant. You? You are the apple of the eye of a knothole. Were it possible, you'd relocate in a trice. A certain volcano in Peru comes to mind …

"Master?" Smirking Jaye stands upon the flagstone steps that curve upward into your castle proper. Smirking Jaye seems blandly ordinary except for his flat affect. However, under the fur-trimmed velvet gloves his hands are bare bone. His feet (knee-high boots) and penis (iron codpiece, also fur trimmed) are in a similar fleshless condition. Is he alive or living dead? He can hold his breath for an extended duration for whatever that's worth. Similar to yours, his heart (which you once beheld after he suffered a grievous slash from some do-gooder's axe) is not a muscle, but instead a prodigious tumor. He does not smile unless you catch him from the corner of your eye, albeit catching him is akin to tricking one's own image in a mirror. Legend has it that only his victims see the real smile.

"Is it possible visitors have arrived unannounced? King Mingy's envoys? There are two among them … a Royal Dragoon and an upright beast of the Ur Blood? Sir Marion Hand and Rabbit Abbot? Should I fear the worst?" Your henchman (a man cursed with the inability to utter a declarative sentence) isn't given to emotion, much less hyperbole.

You consider the unhappy ramifications of this surprise visit by the king's agents. Concentration is difficult this close to the source of your greater self and its eternal song. The Void raves beyond the thin barrier, louder after its recent feeding. It cannot be propitiated. It cannot be sated. It seeks to wipe away your facsimile personality and send you on a mission of annihilation. You struggle to retain individuality and succeed by a gnat's hair.

"Jaye."

"Yes, Baron?"

“Did they bring the dog? I hate dogs, especially him.”

“No?”

“A stroke of luck. Break out the good china.”

The Metal Womb of a Terror Star

Snow melted and returned. An emperor and several kings shed the bonds of flesh and deliquesced into the soil. Several small wars were waged. Life went on as usual. Occasionally, an unkindness of ravens perched atop the hill and shat upon the standing stones. Many roosted among the limbs of the dread wave-a-bit tree which had tolerated the birds for millennia. None of the ravens were of the Ur lineage; they could not articulate what compelled them to gather. The Peloki and Malet peoples considered ravens spirit messengers and heralds of the Underworld. It is possible the unkindnesses waited for a special variety of death.

Meanwhile, unimpeded by earthly laws of physics, Lochinvar’s body and conscious mind hung suspended within the black ice of a glacier transported from the southern pole of a deserted planet that orbited a star so distant from Earth it could not be seen by telescope. Her subconscious flickered in orbit around the aforementioned star. She did not comprehend the paradox. The voice of the Overmind (as the disembodied intelligence that inhabited surrounding shadows referred to itself) soothed her. A peculiar form of education commenced, delivered by this spectral presence of a long-extinct species. Mother’s secrets, and the secrets of the civilization Mother and her kind served, were revealed via an intravenous drip directly into young Lochinvar’s brain.

One day her subconscious beamed home from the galactic rim and thus reunited mind, body, and soul. Her animating pattern was downloaded into a specially designed and semi-indestructible body. On her left shoulder, the tattoo of a shrike imprinted a storehouse of fragmented lore that might improve her lot among troglodytes or see her burned as a witch. Armor and weapons appropriate to the milieu were provided. Before Lochinvar exited the steel womb beneath the hill by the nameless river, the Overmind warned her not to return. Defense protocols were in effect.

Your pattern has developed to maximal saturation. Employ your knowledge in the service of great and terrible deeds, the Overmind said.

“I don’t feel as if I know anything,” Lochinvar said.

Relatively speaking, this is also true.

“Am I a changeling?”

No longer. Now you are real girl again, more or less. Gravity reversed and lifted the real girl toward the surface of the world. Goodbye, Lochinvar. Wreak havoc—here, and in every possible universe.

Last Supper at Castle Blood

Supper is a disaster. On the scale of Pompeii or Krakatoa or Atlantis or the last act of a Shakespeare play.

The King’s agents station their entourage outside in the bailey. These two, the Ur beast and the knight, are not interested in foie gras nor your impressive array of summer wines. They have come because they are concerned with rumors of rape and plunder and darker deeds that waft from your barony. Peasants are missing by the wagon-load. Whole villages lie deserted but for the rats.

The blondie dragoon’s eyes narrow and his smile sharpens. He observes your unnatural height and frightful countenance (which you oh so subtly manipulate as the lamps flicker; you are a distorted mirror of those around the banquet table). He is such a cocky bastard in his snow-white plate mail and velvet cape. So handsome it hurts. No doubt he has left many a deflowered maiden and a passel of bastards scattered across the land.

Rabbit Abbot strokes his whiskers. Wisely, he doesn’t touch his goblet or plate. He nonchalantly asks if you happened to receive a local woman named Elizabeth Lochinvar—wife to Esteban Lochinvar, a hunter and flautist extraordinaire.

Apparently, Rabbit Abbot and the lady were comrades and had, some years prior, served as frumentarii in the Imperial Ministry of Vigilance. Later, she retired to civilian life while he became Superior of Speculatores, lately emeritus. The rabbit wears a gold tabard over his silky black fur. The tabard denotes his special status as King Mingy’s favorite envoy. He weighs

twenty stone if a pebble, primarily muscle, and his eyes are dark as honey glazed with the blue tint of age. He has no need to carry a blade. His incisors are wicked sharp, as are the claws of his hind legs. Like most Ur beasts, Rabbit Abbot presents a serious threat to any who provoke his ire. You provoke his ire. It's a challenge and it's fun!

"Lord Abbot, Master of the Empress's hunters—"

"Those were the good old days, Baron. Today I speak as an ambassador to the King."

"Forgive me. Protocol, precedence—"

"Some might consider it a demotion. I view it as a working retirement. Again I ask: an informant claims your man," Rabbit Abbot wrinkled his nose in distaste, "went to her home and made a wreck of the place. She and her daughter are missing and the husband's bones lie upon the ruins of their abode. I pray you to explain."

"Of course, my lord. You are fond of the pleasure automaton."

"Automaton?" Rabbit Abbot's nose twitches. He's a shrewd one; mill wheels are grinding in his febrile brain. Evidently the Lochinvar woman's true nature was a mystery to even her boon companions. Were his life expectancy to exceed the next few minutes he would doubtless catch on to the whole truth.

"No matter. It happens." You shrug. "In your capacity as bedeviler of ingrates and criminals, you ran legions of scofflaws to ground. Killed many of them. Listened to their cries for mercy and then heated the irons. You took pleasure in this thing, yes?"

"The Creator says we should take pride in our accomplishments and pleasure in our deeds."

You hunker upon your throne at the head of the table, having endeavored to keep a dozen well-trained and heavily armed guards between you and him. You permit your genteel smile to widen into a grin. Such a relief to let the façade crumble. Mind reading isn't your gift, although surface fears and desires are yours to breathe in as a wolfhound winds its prey. You whiff a particular memory and your expression imitates the exuberant malice of a

trapper who'd snared baby Rabbit Abbot once upon a time and left the scar of a wire snare embedded in his hind leg.

"Exactly, Lord Abbot. The Creator says so. What does Satan say? Recall, if you will, the squeals of craven victims and then imagine those sounds escaping from the lips of your lady friend as I subjected her to scarcely conceivable indignities. Imagine my delight in grinding her bones for my snuff box." The pièce de résistance to your speech is the moment you produce said snuff box, a crimson lacquered affair with the initials BN, pop the hinge, and snort corpse dust.

One of your servants wallops a gong and it's on.

On cue, Smirking Jaye slithers from behind a tastefully erotic Roman tapestry and loops a garrote over the dragoon's neck. Possibly Smirking Jaye falters—he received permanent injuries from his encounter with the aforementioned Lochinvar woman. Also, Sir Hand has a reputation for world-beater skill in battle—single-combat champion at the King's Tourney five years running. He performs as advertised. His plated mail gauntlet catches and snaps the wire in a reflexive convulsion. He reaches over his shoulder, grasps Smirking Jaye by the forearm, and flings him across the feast hall.

Sir Hand draws his blade and grins. "Come on then, fuckers." He doesn't wait for the guards to accept his invitation, but begins chopping them to ribbons at once. Snicker-snack. Marksmen lurk on the balcony. Crossbow bolts zing around the dragoon. Three quarrels stick into his armor. Other bolts glance aside harmlessly except for a scratch on his fair brow. Now he's angry.

Rabbit Abbot springs onto the upper deck. His levitation is as effortless as that of the mystics of the Far East who sleep upon beds of nails when not breathing fire and massacring their foes in battle. The marksmen hunch to reload. Slow going, alas. Rabbit Abbot sweeps past; he snips their heads with jaws like hedge clippers trimming a row of daisies. Then he drops from the balcony and is among your guards and it isn't any prettier. He swipes with his claws, front and back. Faces and limbs are scratched off entirely.

A horn sounds. The front gate crashes inward. The King’s men-at-arms rush through the gap, swords whetted for slaughter.

What your enemies do not comprehend is that your valiant doomed guards are not here to prevail. Nay, the cannon fodder is present only to provide you with a repast of gore and fleeing life essence. You are the extension of the rift in the cellar. Muffled by tons of stone, it shrills for sustenance. Its need is your need. You inhale deeply. Streamers and gouts of blood redirect from wounds and sluice through the air into your enormous funnel of a maw. Your belly distends and your reach lengthens. Your laughter changes. Your disfigured shadow falls over these puny vermin as they struggle in extremis. All heads turn to regard your awesome aspect.

For a while you even think you might win.

The Old Homestead

Lochinvar had not seen the home of her youth since she’d fled its destruction forty winters ago. Scant traces of the cabin remained. An overgrown pile of rocks marked the family hearth where the Lochinvars once gathered to drink cocoa and sing yuletide carols. She glimpsed her mother, nude and pale as ice, leaning against a hemlock. Lochinvar emitted an uncharacteristic scream and clapped her gauntlet over her mouth in chagrin. Mantooth trotted over and sniffed. Finding nothing of interest, he gave his mistress a puzzled whine.

Hand swigged from a wineskin, as he did every few minutes without appreciable result.

“Miss Lochinvar, how is it you don’t look a day over sweet sixteen?”

She removed her winged helm and wiped away sweat. “I get lots of beauty sleep.” Lochinvar hadn’t known the disgraced knight long, except by reputation and her mental reconstruction of the massacre at Baron Need’s castle. Mother had not spoken of him or Rabbit Abbot. Indeed, until the day of her husband’s murder, Mrs. Lochinvar successfully hid the existence of her former life as a spy and provocateur.

Mantooth had dutifully tracked Hand to a village dump site and dragged him out of a pile of refuse by the scruff. Lochinvar introduced herself and

Bowie. Once Lochinvar explained her intentions, Hand ceased struggling and sobered in a hurry.

You intend to confront Need? he'd asked. Why do you want me? Why the scout? She'd shrugged. I need the scout because muscle is handy and he's cheap. I want you because you defeated the sonofabitch once and I'm superstitious like that. They say he fears dogs, and Mantooth owes him a reckoning. Flint? I can't be expected to walk, can I?

The curse Rabbit Abbot laid upon the Baron is not indefinite. The passing seasons bring evil ever nearer to a renewal of its unquenchable blood lust. Each of you loved my mother in her youth. Her gaze fell upon the hound and charger as well. Each of you owe her memory a debt and so I've assembled this company of vengeance. Baron Need is said to be one of the Undying. Assuming this to be the case, it is questionable whether we can permanently destroy him. That we shall try is enough for the moment. My blade cuts through a spectrum of resistance. My … music box … will apprehend his vital essence. The sight of old nemeses such as yourselves might freeze the Baron for a crucial moment. Whether or not any of you can provide material assistance is beside the point—this is a dire task and your comradery would make it easier to bear.

A nice speech. Coupled with an impressive armament and genuine facility for violence, it secured the loyalty of her ragtag band. Their journey had led them into the Headsman Mountains and to this overgrown plot. The men shuffled their feet and watched the young woman in the ancient armor press her forehead against the hearth stones in the attitude of prayer.

Bowie said to Hand, "The scribes say you and Rabbit Abbot brought low Baron Need and burned his castle in the winter of '09. Royal decree proclaims it a no-man's land for one hundred years and a day. I must ask: How did you defeat him?"

"Defeat isn't the word that best describes that cluster of fucks. 'Escaped while making a hell of a mess is closer' to the truth. Apparently our foe yet lives—to wit, his pet vampire bat you whacked the other night."

"The lingering presence of the Baron's cronies and servitors does not necessarily indicate his survival."

"Somebody's got to pay the wages."

“There’s that. Tell me anyway, how it happened.”

Hand looked toward the sun as it drifted behind the peaks. The trees were already lumping together into a charcoal blot. “Yeah, we went at the baron hard. Rabbit Abbot was convinced he’d discovered your mother’s identity and murdered your entire family. He didn’t have any evidence, but got a royal writ due to his connections. I went along for the ride. I lived to fight and was a bit sweet on your mom anyway. Fools, the both of us.

“In the end, Rabbit understood what we faced.” He considered his wineskin. His deep-set eyes were red around the rims. His formerly aquiline nose (once featured by portrait painters throughout the realm) hooked. He had three teeth in his mouth and wattles on his still thick neck. His former bulk had otherwise melted away to cords and bones. “We went to his castle thinking Baron Need a common murderer, a petty tyrant who’d gotten too big for his pantaloons. I expected debauchery, defiled maidens, a few bodies. Instead …”

The knight shuddered and took another drink from the skin. That steadied him. “The action commenced and everyone in the feast hall began dying. The Baron … changed. No longer sickly or gaunt as a leper. Satan inhabited him. The chandeliers blazed hellfire, but the hall became darker and darker. The Baron’s face caved under his bulging eyes and became a light-sucking hole. Blood flowed to him from every corner. He didn’t simply inhale blood. He gulped in the very light and sound around us, the heat from our bones. Never moved from his spot at the head of the table. His ropelike arms unwound and from every corner of the room that demon snatched men and rammed them into the seething ruin of his visage. His claws stabbed through my soldiers, chainmail and flesh, two or three at a clutch, and lifted them as if they were paper dolls. Their shrieks and oaths went down his throat, twisted in reverse.”

“Yet you prevailed,” Bowie said. “Rabbit Abbot saved the day.”

“The Ur beast died so that the rest of us might live.” Hand regarded his ragged boots in shame.

“How, dragoon? By what miracle?”

“It’s in the scrolls.”

“The scrolls leave much to the imagination, friend.”

“My mother fabricated a device,” Lochinvar said. “She entrusted it to the safekeeping of Rabbit Abbot and the Ministry of Vigilance when she retired from Imperial service. That’s what undid the enemy.”

Bowie raised his gray brows. “Wouldn’t look anything like an out-of-tune music box, would it?”

“She carried a talisman. Break-in-case-of-cosmic-evil sort of a deal. Exceedingly lethal to things that go bump in the night. Pity she did not foresee her own necessity. One doesn’t expect to draw evil incarnate as a landlord when one retires into the country, I suppose.”

“Yes, yes, a talisman.” Hand nodded at the memory. “Rabbit brandished it as the Baron dragged him to his doom. The talisman flared with a pure white radiance. There came a sound … All the devils in hell keened as one. Those of us who remained were stricken with blindness that lasted many hours. Fortunately, reserves I’d stationed in the bailey rushed to drag us from the castle as it burned.”

“This raises some interesting questions,” Bowie said to Lochinvar. “Since your mother’s death, I have heard certain rumors regarding her provenance. Some whisper she was not mortal, that she was Seelie from Under the Hill in Oberon’s court sent forth to mix blood with mortals for reasons privy only to that ilk—”

“Hmm. It’s my mother this, my mother that, with you, Jonathan. There you were in the middle of a war; a pair of spies, danger at every turn. Allow me to do the math. Romances have sparked over less …”

“—and a sage in the far west claims in that winter of ’09 you were taken by the fey and lived several winters among them. That you’ve been sent forth to do their bidding with mystical armor and a dread blade cast from star metal. They say you, like Jon Foot and others of that ilk, command the Voice of the Dark.”

“Little people are a myth,” Lochinvar said.

“What about little green men?” Hand gestured as if to brush aside the emerging stars.

“Little green men are taller than you’d assume.” Lochinvar balanced the music box upon her palm. “My friends under the hill taught me to carve

such trinkets, and Mother before me. Five winters and too many tears for me to ever forge another."

"Secret weapons are to the good. Your soul-trapper may do in a pinch."

"Add souls to the manifest of things that don't exist. Sentient beings possess consciousness. Consciousness can be bottled."

"I'm not a philosopher, Ms. Lochinvar. I'm a drunk. Why disguise your weapon as a music box?"

"Because I can't play a harmonica."

An Ever-Sharp Knife

Beans and weak tea for supper. Lochinvar laid her head against Mantooth's side and drifted away to sleep. Flint cropped the tough grass that grew in the mountains. The men sat in the dark near the dying fire, drinking the last of Hand's wine.

"Smirking Jaye—alive or dead?" Bowie asked.

"An excellent question."

"No guesses?"

"I didn't see him die if that's what you're wondering," Hand said. "Frankly, I don't care either way. He took his orders from the man. The Baron is the architect of our various miseries, not his footmen."

"Lochinvar differs on that score. She dreams of mounting his head on a pike."

"We've each got our fantasies. What do you dream?"

Bowie had been regarded as the greatest barbarian-fighter in a dozen generations. During the peak of the Westward Expansion handbills bore his likeness and pennants flew in his honor. Even then, wags at the Capital called him Peloki-Killer behind their sleeves. He'd separated hundreds of blue-painted devils from their heads. Men, women, and children without discrimination. The title followed him even now, long after the wars were highly embellished anecdotes inked on a scroll. His eldest brother had sung for kings and his youngest brother invented outlandish knives, fought duels, and finally got himself killed in one (for the record, a mutual destruction).

Both men were enshrined and beloved by a grateful populace. Jonathan Bowie had saved an empire. His reward? Obscurity except to grudging scholars, most of whom were eager to whitewash the seamy details of the expansion. Starting with the many, many massacres Bowie had orchestrated.

"We're up north, in a field after a battle. Me and some comrades from the regiment. Of course, those guys are dead. The air is heavy with blood. I'm taking scalps. Hundreds of them from faceless men." He held a Green River knife so it glinted in the firelight. His famous brother had forged the fighting knife for him and engraved Number One Peloki-Killer on the hilt. "You?"

"Nothing so exotic. I'm in my favorite alley in the Capital, drinking. Dog shit and mud up to my shins. Buzzing flies cover the sound of the market shouts and that damned infidel pipe-music the Easterners play." Hand sighed and cast the empty skin aside. At the end of the day he sat straight and his hands were steady. "Are these visions of the hell that awaits us?"

"A strange idea of hell. Ain't so awful. I never run short of scalps and my blade is ever sharp. Scalping in the quiet that follows the screams and war cries is soothing. Meditative, like weeding a garden for eternity."

"Perhaps you're on to something. My flask is bottomless. The drone of the flies is sort of comforting."

"There you go."

"Huh," Hand said.

Meanwhile, Lochinvar dreamed of a pure, boundless void and her mother's toneless, metallic voice calling from the distance, counting down.

Culling Song

Rabbit Abbot detonates his holy hand grenade.

A star bursts in the feast hall and a vast, invisible pattern that conjoins the Great Dark and mundane reality is obliterated with a thunderclap. Closed circuit; your connection to the Void is instantly severed and you come unraveled. Flesh melts from your bones. Blood escapes your deliquescing corpse like steam from a whistling kettle. Your skeleton puffs to ash and

makes an arabesque upon a pillar. As the material projection of eternal darkness, you cannot die in the traditional sense, so you simply cease to exist as a collection of coherent particles.

You are a mask of flesh; torn away and discarded. Essence diminished, you assume the existence of a drowsing haunt, reliving your greatest defeat again and again by way of muddled and disjointed dreams. The worst of these dreams have nearly awakened you. These are the days when unseasonal storms wrack the Headsman Mountains, when streams flow crimson, and earthquakes shake loose landslides, only to subside as you relapse into deepest slumber.

Today, though, a sacrifice …

Fleetwood, last of the red-hot sycophants, flutters over the parapet, through a hole in the wall, and dies at your feet with an expulsion of bodily fluids. His warmth rouses you from a torpor that has persisted for years. Your physical form has congealed to a mold stain on a pillar. The configuration of this stain frightens away wildlife and gives the occasional ambitious tomb robbers night terrors before one of your dwindling supply of henchmen does them in as they sleep in furtive camps at the edge of the property.

Fleetwood's melodramatic expiration sends a trickle charge into your heart (that beats once a fortnight) and gets it thumping faster. The connection to your greater self is still lost. You sense the Void and its hunger the way you might scent smoke and discern a fire. Since that fateful supper, your greater existence is reduced to abstraction in a manner similar to how matters of existentialism are for any mortal philosopher. Unlike the monks and the scribes, you possess proof that incomprehensibly awesome cosmic forces are in motion. You are the proof. Perhaps after eons of enslavement you are also free.

Dawn is brisk. Wisps of vapor rise from Fleetwood's corpse. The wisps twist into phantom shapes of the Ur bat's recent memories. You behold the ghostly visages of enemies on the approach. Two men, gray and infirm, yet formidable in their hatred and self-righteousness. The girl resembles her mother. The horse limps slightly; he hates the drunken knight. Only the dog

frightens you. However, given his decrepitude, surely he presents little danger.

The column cracks with the sharpness of your grin. Bits of plaster tumble.

Full manifestation requires nourishment. Though your body is temporarily disbanded, an immense reservoir of willpower endures. You project it in a psychic melody. A culling song. Softly, sweetly until the roaches come. Stronger, stridently, and then the rodents emerge. You drain them in their hosts. Scraps of fur and desiccated shells form a carpet of death spiraling outward.

Yes, a heap of rats, bats, and cockroaches give their all before you are restored to a shadow of your former glory. Undead again is close enough, and you are ready for the night.

Castle Blood II

The ruins of Baron Need's castle were embedded in the flank of Mowat Mountain. A central tower, a section of the inner bailey, and the main house stood intact—the rest had collapsed and become overgrown with a thicket of sickly hawthorn and copses of twisted cedar and birch. Human skulls decorated the brush like popcorn strung through the branches of a diseased Yule tree.

"Powerful cheery," Bowie said.

"Tomb robbers and brigands are in short supply in these hills, and now we see why," Hand said.

"The People shun this place. Smack dab in the heart of their tribal lands before the Empire annexed the mountains. Yet the First Kingdoms declined to reclaim it."

"The Empire taints everything, eh?" Hand said without irony.

"Can't argue against."

Mantooth snuffled some bones. He growled and his hackles rose.

Lochinvar glanced at him as she dismounted Flint. "What's the matter, pup?"

"A bad thing lives in the house," Mantooth said.

“Bad dangerous bad,” Flint said. The charger’s nostrils flared and his eyes showed much of their white.

“Can’t bite it.”

“Can’t trample it.”

“Nonsense,” Lochinvar said. “It can be trampled and bitten and cleaved, or blown to smithereens.”

“I am afraid,” the dog said.

The horse whinnied.

“Me three.” Lochinvar put on her helmet. She became a pitiless, inhuman creature once the winged helm settled upon her brow. “Don’t see me pissing my breeches, though.” She said to Mantooth, “Orlando was your pup. You have business to attend.”

Mantooth lowered his snout and whimpered in shame.

“Hold fast while I reconnoiter.” Bowie vanished into the underbrush with nary a rustle. A few minutes later he uttered the call of a raven, the prearranged signal. Lochinvar, Hand, and Mantooth climbed the slope to the ruins. Flint stayed back. The big horse cropped grass and kept watch. He muttered, “Good luck, dog.”

The sun shone hot.

“I’m with the critters on this,” Hand said. Pale and shaky from a dearth of booze, he lagged a few paces to the rear. “It returns to me now. The full effect of horror.”

“Courage, Sir Hand,” Lochinvar said.

“Believe it or not, I was a brave man.” Hand carried a bokken stained with blood and grime. He’d pawned his broadsword long ago. “Bravest in the land.”

“Bravery and stupidity are the Ouroboros of youth,” Lochinvar said. “Follow me, knight. I want to speak with the monster before nightfall. There’s much to discuss. We are alike, he and I.”

“Alike? Wait, doesn’t the villain usually say that to the hero, and laugh?”

Lochinvar laughed. “Happy?”

“Uh, truthfully?”

“I didn’t live under a hill with fairies those lonely years. I incubated in the black glow of a terror star and learned what Rabbit Abbot discovered at mortal cost and Mother already knew—the secret of Baron Need. He is merely an appendage. After absorbing the genetic memory of a civilization older than the dust of the first mountains, I hatched to walk the earth once more. Vengeance is an honorable cause. This, however, is a mission of mercy. In truth, I’m not here for the Baron. Not entirely.”

“Lady Lochinvar, I don’t take your meaning.”

“Which part?”

“The whole thing.”

She laughed again. Rebuke glowed in her left gauntlet, its metal awash with bloody clouds.

Showdown

Bowie emerged from a clump of bushes and led the company under the shadows of the gate arch. He hacked aside brambles with a siege axe. Ravens warbled from the battlements as the foolish humans and their dog walked through the gaping entrance of the main house. The birds had seen this routine before. One way or another, soon there’d be fresh carcasses to feast upon.

Lochinvar and her companions breached the inner courtyard and entered the castle. Holes gashed the soot-caked ceiling. Marble floors were buckled and cracked. Withered saplings clawed toward the sun. Brown vines clung to pillars carved with grotesques of beasts. Bones of rats crunched underfoot. Carapaces of beetles and roaches layered the ground in concentric rings. Everything in this place was dead—all thorns, detritus, and ash.

“Saints protect us.” Hand adjusted his hat as he took in the vista of slaughter. “There are many ghosts here. I can almost hear them.”

“Hold that thought,” Lochinvar said. Under different circumstances, protocol demanded protective circles, chants, and onerous rituals. Tarrying near the pit whence Baron Need had sprung to plague the world presented too great a risk. She opened the music box and made an adjustment to its

setting. The device emitted the groans of a man or woman getting his or her throat slit. The horrid death cries echoed among the pillars and dust.

Presently, Bowie whistled. “To the left, friends.” The scout’s vision remained sharp—a shadow crept forward to the edge of a cascade of sunlight and resolved to the gangling figure of a tall man. The figure hunched, yet loomed in tattered robes. Air flickered the way a stream undulates over a bed of stones. Light and heat bent toward the distortion. Chill enveloped the shattered hall.

Mantooth snarled. Foam drooled from his jaws. “Bite. Rend. Kill.”

Lochinvar gripped Rebuke’s hilt and stepped forward. “Gentlemen … Mantooth … Positions, please.” At her word, the others fanned out as they approached the figure, and halted a few feet short. “Good afternoon, Baron. We meet again.” She gave a mock curtsy.

“I’m certain I would recall a morsel delectable as you, dear.” The Baron’s voice was low. It quavered slightly. Fear? Anticipation?

“You met my mother. I’m the new and improved design.”

“Met her? I ate her. Skin, bones, and all. Can an automaton be rightly said to have a child? Can the child of an automaton be rightly said to have a mother?”

“She was not an automaton,” Lochinvar said. “There’s a civilization of those cold bastards out there; post-singularity predators, never doubt. My mother’s people are different … human enough where it counts.” She tapped her helm. “They simply traded degradable skin for a more durable alternative. Me, I’m second-generation hardware. A skin bag of self-replicating circuitry and rage piloted by a carbon-based brain.”

“Primate with advanced tools.”

“You’re ejecta from a black hole that mindlessly hungers for everything that exists outside its maw. At least I have free will, puppet.”

The Baron’s form shrank and contracted, then expanded once more, and the roiling of the air around him intensified. He turned his head to regard Bowie, Hand, and Mantooth, and back to Lochinvar. “Mindlessness is an uncharitable assessment. I possess thoughts and feelings. Strong feelings.”

“An algorithm doesn’t equate sentience,” Lochinvar said.

“Boring, boring. Perhaps I shall devour you and end this dreary conversation.”

“If you possessed your full strength, I am sure you would try. Why don’t you go ahead and try? The timing of my visit is no accident. The calculations were exacting. Arrive too early, you might not have regenerated to corporeal form. Arrive too late and you’d be full of snuff and vinegar.”

“Twit. As arrogant as your mother.”

“Leave off skulking among carrion and have at me if you dare.”

The Baron sighed and uncoiled, claws first—

Lochinvar raised the music box like a duelist aiming her blunderbuss. The box popped open and emitted a funereal chime. Baron Need fell to his knees, hissing. His nails dug into the earth and tore it up in clods.

Lochinvar nodded toward Mantooth. “Do you know him? By reputation, surely. You killed his pup. Remember Marion Hand? Picture him a clean-shaven lad with a lovely blond mane. Or Mr. Jonathan Bowie? He’s a coiffure expert.”

“The past is here for you, monster,” Bowie said.

Discordant notes harmonized into “The Hearse Song.”

Worms crawl in—

The dirge lashed the Baron. He rocked so his upper body pitched near the light. His features dissolved and reformed. He flickered and flickered—man, animal, woman. A cadaverous giant, an Ur rabbit, a noble, a peasant, a milkmaid, and others.

Worms crawl out—

Lochinvar made an adjustment and the rhythm increased as its tones lowered.

Baron Need’s eyes bulged and his ghoul tongue whipped and flung bile. He tore his hair and rent his cheeks until tar-thick gore spilled from the wounds. Bones shifted and reconfigured and his visage softened into that of an agonized woman. She extended her arm in supplication. Meanwhile, Karl Lochinvar stood with her three-body-blade raised high for the killing stroke.

Worms play pinochle on your snout—

Lochinvar's mother said, "Darling, I've missed you. I'm sorry."

The sword descended in its arc and the apparition's head was struck from her shoulders. Tendrils of vapor slithered from the corpse, twined around Lochinvar's sword, and poured into the music box as its eerie melody devolved into a cacophony of discord. The crystal shrike's heart pulsated radioactive crimson, and then darkened but for a solitary mote revolving in its interior universe. She snapped shut the lid.

Mantooth sat on his haunches and howled.

"It must have been hard to strike down the beast," Bowie said. His hands shook as he lighted a cigarette. "Such a cunning devil to resemble your mother in detail. He thought to undo your resolve. Joke's on him."

"Was it worth the pain to behold her phantom?" Hand said to Lochinvar.

"No, but trapping Need's miserable, shriveled life-force pays for all."

"And what shall you do with it?"

Lochinvar caressed the worn enamel of the box. This provoked a muffled buzzing, as of a tormented wasp. "The box is a kind of iron maiden. Or a strappado. Or a rack. It has two modes—oblivion and torture. Eternal sleep or unceasing agony. I designed it to bind the twenty-one grams that animate men and many of the things that seek to pass as men."

"You mean to torment him … what remains of him," Bowie said. "I applaud the exaction of vengeance, and yet wonder how long this can go on."

"Until the stars fall from the sky." She nodded in satisfaction as the tiny screams crested and ebbed with her ministrations.

Hand and Bowie exchanged a glance. Neither had the stones to say anything, and then it was time to go away from that place.

The Loneliest Shack in the Black Forest

After the intruders depart in gloating triumph, you hobble through the front gate of the castle. At first you are an inky thread—turn sideways and you'd be invisible. The yammering of the Void fades with every step and with

every step your form gains substance. Night forests and night skies merge. Your heartbeat quickens. You limp. You stride. You fly along game trails. A swath of woodland creatures shrivels and desiccates in your wake. Eventually, trees give way to a pocket of rancid marsh.

You pass over a collapsed picket fence and are among dilapidated hutches caked with muck and leaves and the slime of the deep woods. Rabbits squeal at your approach. Hundreds of them huddle in the darkness, nipping and jostling one another as their terror mounts.

Your shadow blackens the door of a moldering cottage. Kerosene light dribbles between shutters. A tendril of smoke lolls from the chimney and it smells of roast coney. You knock once, heavy.

“Master?” Smirking Jaye is wrapped in soiled pelts. A knife drops from his fist as he kneels. He weeps and presses your hand to his cheek.

You lick the supernumerary’s tears from your talons. The walls of his rude shack are draped with rabbit skins. Buckets under the table and near the hearth brim with entrails. His prattling recedes into the background of your consciousness. Only in this instant do you relax your guard and spare a thought for the scrape with Lochinvar. The fool. Possibly you could’ve slain the woman and her geriatric companions. Beaten them, eaten them, and been absolved of the whole mess of persistent vengeful foes. Lochinvar’s devices and inhuman physiology presented unknown hazards, especially given your diminishment.

Discretion must out at such moments. Thus, when the enemies arrived on the doorstep, you projected a fraction of your anemic core, a sliver of the multitudes that constitute your solid state, and granted Little Miss Avenging Warrior a cheap victory. You kept a low profile as she captured the lesser spark of your essence in her peculiar contraption and galumphed away, none the wiser.

The loss of the mother’s pattern was a small price to pay for such a grand deception. Will young Lochinvar ever twig to the fact it really is her mother’s soul, for want of a better term, which now inhabits the strange music box prison? Who can say? Who cares?

“Jaye, attend me.” His obeisance gratifies your sense of propriety. On the other hand, the years have not been kind and perhaps he’s forgotten how to

serve you properly. “I have a craving.”

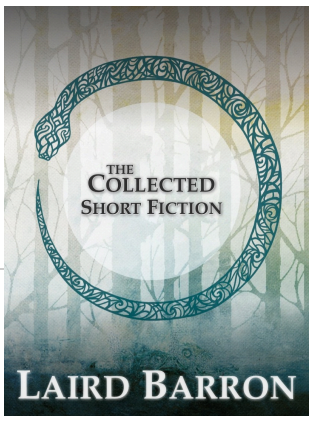
“Are you hungry, Master?” A silly question—your hunger is unquenchable.

You pat his head. “Yes. As luck would have it, I’m in the mood for meat.”

Smirking Jaye retrieves his knife and limps for the door. “How many?”

You think of the logging villages that once nestled in these hills and valleys. You think of the towns and the cities that lie beyond the range. “Oh, let’s start with all of them.”

An Atlatl



This version taken from *Limbus III*, 2016
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Prelude: Doomsday Variations

KRAKATOA (ALPHA CONTINUUM)
RECORDING 5:

Watching the Doomsday recordings used to be forbidden. The thumbdrives were locked in the governor's strongbox and nobody talked about them. Talking about them earned you ten lashes. Sneaking a peek was a bullet behind the ear.

Way, way back in my youth, when I showed my fangs and claws more often. Back when folks still played the Star Spangled Banner, observed defunct federal holidays and figured humanity could get up from the canvas once more a la War of the Worlds. *Yeah, the first twenty years after the dust settled was pretty much as dreary and uptight as the post-apocalyptic movies my generation adored until it was eaten alive.*

Now, nobody gives a shit.

Sure, it's against the rules, but I play a scene every night; lie back in my cot with a bottle of XO and marvel at how many goddamned eyes in the sky were floating around during the Information Age. Krakatoa's *archive is comprehensive; five or six hundred hours of viewing entertainment. I can choose from countless perspectives in two dozen countries. Often, I fast-forward and watch the mess unfold like a mushroom cloud in time-lapse photography.*

I don't listen to the commentary anymore. Don't need to; tiny yellow subtitles, you see. I prefer the womb noises around me as the Krakatoa *drifts. The* Krakatoa *is everything, our cocoon of warmth and light in darkness. I pay close attention to her creaks and rumblings. Her moods.*

Sleep comes astride double flickers of blue static…

END RECORDING

Chapter 1 (Jane 1.0)

The universe tilted across the plane of midnight.

Dick squired his date to a romantic hilltop at the edge of town for their illicit rendezvous. He parked his sleek blue Mustang under the low-hanging limb of a cottonwood tree. A lonely kind of night. The woods were extra dark and full of coyotes, hoot owls, and one or two escaped lunatics from the decrepit asylum down the highway near the maximum security prison and the abandoned slaughter yard. A lunar eclipse would occur in two hours, forty-seven minutes and eleven seconds.

Dick turned on the radio (golden oldies, natch), killed the bottle of Jim Beam, and lighted cigarettes from the dashboard, and afterward, tossed them out the window still smoldering. While Chubby Checker did his thing, Dick loosened his tie and got busy doing his.

“My boyfriend’s gonna kill you,” Jane said without evident concern when his hand wandered to her thigh, then crept northward past the hem of her leather skirt. She leaned farther back and her knees swiveled outward, one knocking the door, the other coming to rest against the leather-bound gearshift knob. She closed her eyes and let her head tilt so the moon shone against the hollow of her throat. Her lips and eyelids were glossy and dusted with bits of diamond like the wings of a night moth.

“Who’s your man?” Dick said, not caring a whit, just exercising a bit of habitual professional courtesy. He slid her panties to the side. “You with that Samoan at the club? That monster.” He glanced up, a fox at the threshold of the coop. “Hey, the Samoan—you with him, or what?”

She sighed and shivered as his fingers went in to the second knuckle. “Nope. Little Mo’s got a regular thing with Candy. He walks me to my car.”

Something huge and dark landed atop the hood and whiplashed the couple in their seats. Metal crumpled. Cracks spread across the windshield. The Mustang’s sailcloth top opened in several ragged slashes and the naked moon shone upon poor Dick and Jane as they cowered. Then the top tore free and hurtled end over end, receding to a speck against the moon.

The shadow doubled at its middle and dug tusks into Dick's face like a scoop excavating hard ice cream. Dick struggled and got his right hand snipped, then the left. Meanwhile, Jane leaped to safety and sprinted away from the crunching and gurgling and the arrhythmic groans of the car's springs.

Forest closed around her and the moon stopped shining.

Chapter 2 (Manson)

The nondescript woman loitering in khaki slacks and a short sleeve shirt, maybe a real blonde, maybe not, it depended on the hair dye and the light; the woman with no discernable tattoos or distinguishing characteristics besides an athletic build, ponytail, and sunglasses—that was T.J. Manson.

Technically she had a bunch of names, kept them in a cigar box in a safe in the wall behind a faded copy of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* at her adopted mother's house, in lovely Van Nuys, U.S.A. She knew about the safe, Mama did. Her girl wasn't Zorro, was she? She was not, for Mary's sake, the Batwoman, was she? Mama tended her own knitting, as they say. Yesterday her name was something else; tomorrow, who could say? Today it was Manson.

It's 11:00 AM and Manson should've been dead five minutes ago. The reason Manson was not dead had a little to do with Lady Luck and even more with the fact she pulled a double cross on Mr. Skald and Mr. Crane. Mr. Skald and Mr. Crane were currently at the end of a gravel road with a pleasant lake view, roasting in a new Tahoe with phony plates. Fire trucks had been dispatched. For now, however, the blaze was too fierce for any firemen to approach. The charred bodies would be identifiable by dental records only. The CSI team would discover a submachine gun and exploded shells that had Manson's name written on them.

Manson wasn't worried. She was cool. She still possessed the cylinder, and what's more, thanks to an affinity for impromptu field interrogation, she comprehended its purpose. There were plenty more where those two came from.

Manson once worked for a company that insisted on code names. Hers was Tarantula. She'd always considered it to be a bit melodramatic, a bit over the top, but it was easy to remember. The Jackal, The Condor, The Tarantula. Manson resembled a tarantula in that she embodied an elegant delivery system of death.

Manson wasn't a master of disguise. Manson took full advantage of genetics. She didn't appear young or old. She wasn't any particular size or height. She existed in a semi-static state, blending into whatever space she occupied at the moment. Anonymity, equanimity, and asocial tendencies were her natural gifts.

Manson didn't train. Didn't lift weights or read books about the deadly arts. Didn't study either; she absorbed complex concepts by osmosis. Her old professors speculated she might be a savant. Generally, she didn't do much except lie around her apartment on the lower end of town and smoke dope or drink cheap tequila and get serviced by every call girl and rent boy in the phone book. No need to screw with the epitome of predatory evolution. She watched cartoons on the tube, or Mexican soaps. When she slept she slept nineteen to twenty hours a day. She slept with a commando knife strapped to her thigh and an assault rifle within easy reach.

A few days before Mr. Skald and Mr. Crane get barbecued in their vehicle by a Molotov Cocktail Manson mixed up in her kitchen with dish soap and diesel while she listened to classic rock, there was a meeting. The meeting was supposed to occur in the marbled plaza of a fancy hotel with umbrellas over the tables and palm trees and waiters in bow ties who spoke pidgin English. Manson didn't like hotels or open plazas, palm trees notwithstanding.

So they convened the face-to-face at a seedy titty bar instead.

Mr. Skald was the taller one. Mr. Crane was the asshole. Well, they were both essentially assholes, however, in Mr. Crane's case he'd mastered the art, he'd made black belt. Mr. Skald did the talking. Not because he was supposed to do the talking, but because Mr. Crane's eyes were glued to the ass of the cocktail waitress.

Blah, blah, blah, was the sum and substance of Mr. Skald's verbal foreplay, which Manson pretended to absorb while she too admired the serving girl's

ass and contemplated how much it would set her back to have the chick over to the pad for a quickie. Maybe a bag of grass would turn the key, it usually did.

Also she wondered which acronym these cowboys rode under. They wore chintzy suits with clip-on ties and smelled of airport gift shop after-shave. Revolvers in shoulder holsters, the air-light aluminum frame model that everybody was carrying. Aluminum frame sidearms were chic like Uzis and Mac-10s had been in the 1980s. A couple of slicks. They seemed roughly as clever as highly socialized chimpanzees with a really well-written script. By the numbers and by the sleazy book for these two.

Mr. Skald apparently considered himself a virtuoso. He endeavored to simultaneously intimidate and flatter Manson. “We are aware of your travels, Ms. Manson—if that is your name, which I am fairly certain it is not. Don’t worry, I don’t care. I mean, Carlos didn’t need no stinkin’ last name. Ha ha. Anyhow. Cuba, Chile, Argentina, Turkey, Angola—quite an itinerary. You have enjoyed the accommodations of our nation’s finest penal institutions—Rikers, CIW, Goree, Sing-Sing. Clap on a turban and it could be Guantanamo. Kidding, kidding.” Like bad poetry it kept coming. “Of course, for you this sufficed as graduate work, eh? Took some powerful influence to, ah, extricate you from some lengthy schedules, I bet. Impressive connections.”

Manson wore sunglasses and a sleeveless shirt to accentuate her physique. She appeared extremely chic despite the fact she didn’t pack a fancy automatic pistol, or any weapon, unless one considered a switchblade a weapon, which most states did, although in Manson’s mind it hardly qualified. She borrowed Mr. Skald’s fountain pen, a veritable icepick, hefty enough to give a fellow an impromptu lobotomy, scrawled her number on a napkin, and pressed it into the waitress’ hand as she collected for the round. The waitress drooped gold-dust lashes in a wink, sexily and with lascivious promise, and wiggled when she set sail.

“Who do I waste?” Manson bounced the pen on her palm. Playing the dumb tough amused her, and so she projected the image of a thug while taking everything in and working out the angles.

“Whom,” Mr. Skald said.

“We don’t want you to waste anybody,” said Mr. Crane who’d recovered sufficiently to speak.

“I’ll do the talking, Bart,” Mr. Skald said. He didn’t sound happy. “As I was explaining, this is a courier job—”

“A courier job?”

“Yeah. Like, you carry shit from one place to another,” Mr. Crane said bitterly. He sucked a lemon wedge.

“You want me to mule?” Manson said. “I don’t mule.”

“But we don’t want you to mule.” Mr. Skald loosened his tie. His cheeks flushed.

“Okay, what do you want?”

“We want you to be a courier.”

Manson bounced the pen.

“There is a man in New York…”

Manson smirked. There was always a man. Occasionally a woman, but usually a man and usually it was Manson’s job to kill him. Manson preferred it that way because she preferred simplicity. Simple business was safe business.

“You must go to this man and acquire something from him. It’s important.”

Manson said nothing. Obviously it was important. Or at least important to them. Otherwise, why were they wasting time in a titty bar talking to a denizen of the lower kingdoms?

“So… can we do business?” Mr. Crane said.

“Yeah. We can do business.”

They talked business in an abstract manner, on the remote chance someone had worn a wire or sneaked a bug under the table. The fee was named and arrangements made. Everybody had a few more drinks and went home happy.

Unfortunately for the lads, in the course of performing due diligence (which included digging up a lot of dirt on the parties involved), she

encountered several individuals who clued her in to the true nature of her assignment. In light of this information, she decided to put paid to her association with Skald and Crane and switch teams.

Eighteen days later, Mr. Skald and Mr. Crane were ash and Manson maintained possession of a locked and sealed space-age cylinder that contained the secrets of the cosmos. She went looking for Isaac Creely, Man of the Pearly White Teeth and a Thousand Excellent Suits.

Interlude: Doomsday Variations

NARRATOR TJ (UNIVERSE GAMMA) RECORDING 1:

Dad and his cronies call it the Rorschach Engine. That's the code name, anyhow.

The final product is half a decade from market, minimum. They've recently graduated from baboons to terminal cancer patients. That's how I make the list. Also, Dad's a big wheel and he's desperate. He shouts at Mom. Repeats "inoperable." One day they argue in the kitchen and he smacks her in the eye. Mom picks up her marbles and says adios, muchachos.

The gang of whitecoats goes to town.

They stick me with needles. Load me into a coffin and hammer on the lid. I watch videos. Cartoons and warped stuff that starts out like cartoons, then changes. Giant cockroaches. Bloody piles of maggots. Soldiers blown to smithereens. Babies starving. Sharks churning the water red. Driver ant swarms over men staked to the ground. Tsunamis. Volcanoes.

Nightmares afflict me. The ocean is a source of terror.

The doctors hit me with inkblot flashcards. Reams of cards. They ask questions about what I see. They ask me to draw pictures. I draw black holes; find out later that the entire test population drew black holes. Proves Dad's suspicions about unified consciousness, I suppose.

I get more nightmares. Cumulus clouds join my expanding list of phobias.

Dad tries to explain what a nanoprobe is, how it can be designed to self-replicate inside the body and ordered to repair damaged cells. Nanogenics, melanoma, quantum mechanics. Whatever. Somebody please explain what's up with my cartoons.

My brain tumor shrivels and disappears.

I still have migraines and nightmares. Something bad happens with another patient. Then another. Hush-hush, of course. I never meet any of them. I never find out exactly what the problem is. Dad mentions a 20 percent survival rate, but I'm too young to understand the implications. Nobody on the research team volunteers an explanation. We plow forward, business as usual.

Even after I'm cured there's work to be done. Could be a relapse. Could be unforeseen side effects. Could be subsidiary applications to the procedure. Could be a pile of money to be made. And we know what eventually came of those grandiose schemes…

RECORDING 1 CONT:

…the only surprising thing about the Rorschach Project getting shut down is the fact nobody is indicted. The program never stood a chance. Beyond the abysmal success rate with human test subjects there is the appalling rash of suicides and cases of insanity among the staff. A couple unrelated disasters overseas involving nanotech drive a spike through its heart.

This unpleasantness coincides with outside pressures no one could've foreseen. After decades of argument, Congress repeals a ban on stem-cell cloning. The competition beats Dad's team to the punch with a cheap, low-risk procedure to correct defective genes that cause certain types of cancer and Alzheimer's.

The nation is enduring its worst economic recession since the 1980s. This problem is exacerbated by the costs required to maintain the new Martian colony. Defense against global terrorism siphons away the remaining funds.

Dad's ruined. Because of the project's shady reputation, nobody will touch him with a ten-foot pole. Last time I see him alive, I'm slogging through my junior year in Stanford. He texts me out of the blue, demands a face-to-face; somehow discovered through the grapevine I've been asking questions about the project. We have our squalid showdown in a filthy coffee shop on the waterfront.

Dad's a drunken wreck, interchangeable with the bums fishing for cigarette butts in the veranda ashtrays. He wants sympathy, he wants forgiveness.

Mostly he wants me to forget I ever heard of the project much less was its star attraction.

To tell the truth, I'm more than slightly fucked up at this point in my life and I don't have a drop of sympathy to spare. I suspect he's done something horrible to me and he doesn't deny it. Can't deny it, not knowing the origin of his miracle cure as he does and how the research team got their grubby hands on it in the first place. Be a while before I learn the sordid details, yet I'm intuitive. Oh, my, am I ever. I don't need the whole story to recognize a hose job when I get one.

I'm at college on a full scholarship and I got the scholarship because I'm a freak of nature. So we spit the inevitable epithets—he's a monster, I'm ungrateful, blah, blah, blah. He starts bawling and I realize the lump in his coat pocket is a handgun, and also the impression its bullets are intended for me except he doesn't have the guts to finish what he came to do. The combination scares me out of my pissed-off adolescent shell enough to listen quietly when he blubbers he doesn't care if I hate him just don't go poking around the project. It's dead, I'm alive, count my blessings and amble on. Dad says he gives the world a decade and a half, tops. Nukes, plagues, climate change, asteroids, a rogue supercollider, invading aliens—one or more of these impending scenarios is going to fuck us over. He honks his nose on his sleeve and lurches out of the coffee shop. Soon after, he's in the belly of a rosewood box.

Poor Dad. Just a victim of his good intentions. Will Rogers' heart and Oppenheimer's instinct for destruction. Oh, you motherless sonofabitch!

His prediction is off, too. We only have seven years left.

It's okay. I'm on the job. Shortly after his funeral, I realize something has changed—a pinhole opens into my subconscious. A pinhole, then a doorway. I can see for miles and miles, doo-dah. Years and years. Centuries. Light years and light years.

An organization called Limbus is to thank for these revelations. If you've never heard of this group, don't be surprised. It's older than dirt and human superstition. I've a hunch Limbus played an important role in making sure that the first amphibian crawled from the primordial slime. Don't quote me; it's only a hunch.

Limbus entered my life at a crucial moment and showed me how to control the Rorschach Engine, how to step through the doorway and survive. You might say they introduced me to my true self… selves.

There are so many worlds, so many imperfect versions of myself trying to do good by doing evil. So many imperfect versions of T.J. playing the fool, playing the victim.

Each woman is prey to the beast.

Each world has a problem unique in its particulars. Death by fire, death by ice, death by any number of methods.

The one true iteration of T.J. lies in a stupor at the heart of the shattering kaleidoscope. Could she save us if we woke her? No, not even Limbus' unimaginable power and resources can stop what's coming.

Besides, Limbus doesn't care whether a particular Earth, or universe, lives or dies. The heat death of the universe is inevitable, as is its eventual resurrection. Time is a ring.

For them, the journey trumps the destination—they move a pawn here, a knight there, and every victory or loss is a footnote in their master thesis. Acquisition of knowledge for the sake of knowledge is their sole aim.

I'm playing a different game.

END RECORDING

Chapter 3 (Thom)

Because she'd dwelled alone since the infamous split with the famous R&B singer, no one had a chance to ask Thom J. Easley why she decided to commit suicide. She would've shrugged and said, *I am sad. Unbearably sad and unbearably tired.*

Before she burned the photo albums (along with the house), she rolled a White Widow blunt and had a good long look at her wallflower self from high school. Under the influence of million-dollar modeling contracts, magazine covers, perfume and jewelry endorsements, and a cavalcade of super-hot pool boys, she'd forgotten Plain Jane.

Who could blame Thom for letting Plain Jane slip her mind? Plain Jane's face, at its most defined, was the face of any number of girls you've seen in a yearbook or a newspaper spread of serial killer victims. The crime essay pictorials where hookers and coeds and young housewives blur together.

She loved her cat; she planned to get a cat; she loved her boyfriend; she fully intended to land a boyfriend. Her parents missed her, although Dad didn't cry during the news conference after the cops recovered the body from the river or the landfill, and Mom dabbed her eyes even though there didn't appear to be much need. She was a good girl, she loved her cat and her boyfriend.

Clad in bra and panties and sandals, she swayed out the front door of a three-million-dollar mansion. Flames burst the windows and bits of glass shattered on the steps during their slow motion saunter to the car. A scene eerily similar to a perfume commercial she shot in '08 before her star waned in the pop culture firmament.

Sleeping pills washed down with a flute of Cristal would've been easier.

The sharp highway bend near the house isn't named Deadman's Curve; it's a nameless part of the Angel Hills access road. There's a cliff on the other side of the guardrail and a forty-foot plunge to rocks and surf. Jane punched their Birkenstock into the accelerator and sent the Jaguar over the edge and into the great beyond.

"You're so vain," said the woman in the passenger seat. A younger, stolid version of Thom. Plain Jane made manifest. "You probably think this is your idea, don't you?"

Time crystalized. The sun coagulated until it became a stone lodged in amber and shone no more.

Thom didn't snuff it on a whim. She put in plenty of work beforehand and came to the decision honestly. Her arc formed a neat circle.

She'd arrived at a few esoteric conclusions at the end of this particular rope. The tabloids were right more often than one might suppose. The conspiracy-theorists had a better batting average than they're credited as well. Thom's brother signed on to the Young Earth Christian movement in

high school. He swore the Moon landings were fake; a guy in his church said the Van Allen Belt would cook astronauts unless their rocket had three feet of lead plating. Didn't make a lick of difference that Van Allen tried to explain how rockets overshot the belt in an arc. Brother Ted's tinfoil hat bullshit made Thom laugh. Anymore, she wasn't so smug. *Charles Fort, Edgar Cayce, Ramtha, Alex Jones, the Warrens… It may be I owe you guys a big fat apology.*

The world was a twisted, screwed up hothouse. Take her circumstances: The child beauty pageant star who allegedly got murdered. Raped and strangled, found stuffed behind a boiler in the basement of her parents' home. She grew up to become a supermodel under an alias. According to celebrity death truthers, her murder was one of many hoaxes routinely perpetrated by the federal government to achieve murky goals.

Conventional wisdom says her row to hoe should've been easy. She was the youngest of three kids. The baby. Mom and Dad were over the notion of babies, though, so she didn't get the usual perks. Brother Ted was the eldest. Tina a year and a half behind him. Then Thom after a gap of six. Nobody ever accused little Thom of being an accident, but she had to be. When she showed up in the oven, Mom had signed with her old corporation and begun making inroads toward a second act of life comeback. Thom's arrival derailed that narrative.

She suffered a personality deficit prior to her third (and final) year in college—as in she didn't possess one of her own. This wasn't an indictment of her family or fallout from a gas lighting boyfriend or an expression of low self-esteem or self-loathing; it's a straight fact. She existed in a state of permanent disassociation. Nothing stirred her blood. Politics, fashion, entertainment, sex. None of it. The prevailing winds carried her where they willed. She bent like the reeds to the dominant opinions of more outgoing classmates and peers. She blended in. Active camouflage became second nature, and eventually, primary nature. Thom didn't know why it took so long to come out of her shell. Deepest part of her had been waiting, or sleeping, and one day it awoke to the flicker of a photographer's fearful eye.

Thom had drunk half a bottle of wine when she found a strange business card in her purse one afternoon. Few were aware of her burgeoning habit

(which included several pills daily and way too much grass) and she scarcely acknowledged it to herself. Although this day was different; this day she'd sunk closer to the muck at the bottom of her life and she stared at the card as if it were a revelation from a god or a devil. A company called Limbus offered jobs to the downtrodden. Toll free, act now.

She might've set aside the bottle and dialed the number. No way to be certain—several hours went missing from her memory banks. She recalled waking in the stairwell of the apartment complex, her eardrum ruptured. As a consequence, she was haunted by weird aural hallucinations (whispers and static) that persisted for a week. A veteran of blackout drunks, Thom promptly discarded the incident and the card.

The official legend of Thom Easley's miraculous discovery as "the next hot thing" went like this:

Grant Jensen shot freelance photos for indie magazines and modeling companies. He met Thom at a Halloween party. Thom had put on a top hat and a ridiculously elaborate silk vest and he snapped her as she made a wry (and according to her classmates, uncharacteristic) kiss at his lens. Jensen later sold that semi-candid pic for a quarter million dollars and a ticket to the big leagues.

Thanks to his fortuitous snapshot, the world soon learned a secret. Thom Easley proved to be a perfect chameleon, or a pristine slate. Drabness was her social camouflage, her intrinsic genius. She inhabited whatever role her handlers and clients proposed. A smudge of eyeshadow, some gold jewelry, and green screen Pyramids as a backdrop, and she became an Egyptian Queen; apply furs, prop broadsword, and a chainmail bikini and she was a barbarian princess. Regency lady, Lady Godiva, nude Celtic goddess, the smoking hot girl next door, whatever the character, she came alive in a way that caused the fashion industry's collective pulse to race. Thom sold it in photographs and she sold it on tape. The costume of the moment constituted her identity to the atoms of her bones.

As for the matter of day to day existence, those moments when the cameras zeroed in on her essential, mundane self, she solved the problem by simply

erasing vanilla Thom (aka Plain Jane) and assuming the role of an international star. Voila.

Thom blacked out when the Jag hit the water, its nose vertical, like an elevator with its cables cut. She torpedoed through the windshield. Riptides are common along that stretch of ocean; one swept the wreckage into the depths. Nobody witnessed the accident, although the police hunted for her after they discovered the mansion burning to the ground. The Coast Guard joined the operation, to no avail. She was listed as missing and presumed deceased.

"You died, lady," said the beach bum who eventually fished Thom's waterlogged corpse from a tidal pool about ninety miles south of the accident. He carried her to his shack where he administered a cure-all of bread crusts dipped in wine broth. She remained semi-comatose for three days.

"I used to be somebody in the world," said the bum whose name was Jules. Tanned and lanky and gray, although only middle-aged. The whites of his eyes swam with busted veins. He wore a Panama hat, a Woody Woodpecker shirt with most of the buttons lost, cargo shorts, and mismatched flip-flops. "You were somebody in real life. I've seen you on a poster at the bus station." He smoked a generic cigarette.

A town sat in from the beach behind the cliffs. Jules swept the boardwalk and emptied trashcans at the tavern. The proprietors repaid his labor with pocket change, six packs of Natty Light, and cheap cigarettes. "You died. You were dead. A dead mermaid."

"Some mermaid," she said.

"Magical. You were unearthly. You glittered like a rainbow trout in the sun. I thought some deep-sea fish had floated in with the tide. Your skin was actually gray. Like a dead seal. I saw how gray when I came closer and the light changed. An oil slick on the surface… Must have been oil."

Thom, still bedridden, checked herself in a chipped hand mirror—the crusted slashes would heal with possible scarring. She was gaunt (even at the high-pressure zenith of her modeling career she'd maintained a

voluptuous figure) and pallid as kelp. She didn't recognize the cold glint in her own eyes and that was disturbing. The swimsuit calendar tacked to the door claimed she'd been in the water for two and a half months. Two and half months? Her post-crash memories were of bone-numbing pressure and a green gulf that blackened into infinity as it pushed into her eyes and flooded the sockets. Then, being reborn on a cot as the ghosts of bathing beauties regarded her with frozen smiles.

"I think you're right, Jules. I died."

Life at the shack settled into an eternal routine. Beachcombing and birdwatching. Long, intermittent naps. She studied the sea, which she yearned for and dreaded—nothing entirely new, except the intensity. Campfires at night. Cheap booze and decent grass. Thom dreamed of treading water in the dark while a massive shape glided past. She also dreamed of being hunted in a forest, of running endlessly, too terrified to glance over her shoulder and glimpse her pursuer.

She compared revisionist histories with her rescuer.

Jules killed a man in Ohio in 1986. He'd clerked for a mom and pop hardware store. A biker staggered in, high on meth, and waved a gun, demanding the cash in the till. Jules picked up a ball peen hammer and clocked the biker between his running lights. Dead on the way to the floor and five to twenty on a manslaughter rap for Jules. "Wasn't any meanness to it. All I saw was that gun. I smelled beer and craziness on the guy. Figured he'd shoot me once I handed over the cash. When I hit him, my arm belonged to somebody else."

He shipped to a medium security prison. Flew the coop one July afternoon while doing a stint with the highway crew. Simply eased into the bushes on the side of the road while another convict yelled about leg cramps. Kept right on walking until he reached the Pacific Ocean. Three decades on and his face hadn't graced the wanted flyers at the post office. He figured maybe the world had rolled on and forgotten him.

He asked Thom if she'd done a murder too. She smoked one of Jules' wretched cigarettes and considered the question. They sat on a boulder and

watched the sun set over the water.

She said, “Worse. I turned thirty-something. The ultimate betrayal of the social contract. Can’t age. Can’t get fat. Can’t get stretchmarks. God help you if your tits sag. You’re supposed to burn your swimsuits and disappear. That’s the rule. You move to New Zealand and herd llamas, or crawl into a hole.”

“I guess you’ve done it. None of your fans would recognize you.” He’d gone to the flea market and scrounged her a floppy, wide-brimmed gardening hat, sunglasses, a selection of pastel summer blouses, baggy linen pants, and sandals.

She agreed—nobody would recognize this emaciated, battered, and wild-eyed beach bum woman with the fresh scars and too-angular cheekbones; not even the cops unless they ran her fingerprints.

“Thanks for everything. I’m strong, I’m good.”

“Moving on?”

“Gotta keep rambling.”

“Well it isn’t much…” He gestured vaguely toward his shack. She’d tried to fuck him twice, once in deferment of expressed gratitude, and later as a matter of pride. He’d apologized and said he’d gone celibate in prison.

“Where will you go? What will you do?” He spoke with patently feigned disinterest. More likely, he wanted to ask if she still planned to off herself after his efforts. She wasn’t quite certain and made no promises. Old Thom was history and dropping off the face of the earth suited Plain Jane, so perhaps extraordinary measures were no longer necessary.

What to do with herself was indeed an open question. Most of Thom’s considerable wealth had swirled down the drain well before current events. Her siblings would soon divide the remainder as inheritance, depending upon the machinery of the California legal system. It was the pirate’s life for her.

“I’m going to do what you do.”

“Aw, kid, you’re no bum,” he said.

“Jules?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“That man you killed. Is he still alive? People who are supposed to be dead sometimes aren’t.”

“Look at you.”

“Exactly.”

“His brains stuck to the hammer. I don’t—he’s dead-dead.”

“Dead-dead.”

It was getting dark and Jules’ face smudged with shadow. “The cops should have come sniffing around by now. Yeah, what a thought! That rotten bastard revived and went home to his rotten family. The cops were so embarrassed they let sleeping dogs lie and didn’t bother to contact me with the good news. Afraid I’d sue them to hell and back for false imprisonment. That’s not the best explanation.”

“What’s the best explanation?”

“Parallel universe. Turn the radio dial and you’re still riding in your car, the sun is still shining, there’s the same old Pacific on your right. Instead of Motown, suddenly you’re tuned into NPR. Dial another micrometer and you’ve got chamber music. It might be the same deal on a larger scale. Quantum entanglement. Swing the hammer, you’re a fugitive. Don’t swing the hammer and you’re a corpse at the boneyard. Turn the dial, it’s one or the other, or both.”

“Nice tinfoil hat you got there, buddy.”

She didn’t have much experience with murderers or man slaughterers. Jules seemed docile in thought and deed, yet his crime must’ve left a stain on whatever passes for the mortal soul. No takebacks once a man tastes blood. Former goddess Thom would’ve despised him for a dozen reasons, beginning with his slovenly appearance and ending with his impotence. Plain Jane would’ve stayed forever, slowly sinking into the tar pit of a Jimmy Buffet-themed purgatory. Newly risen Thom appreciated his feral kindness and forgave him his sins. He hadn’t asked why she tried to end herself. That forbearance represented uncommon courtesy. Nonetheless, she swiped thirty-six dollars from his wallet and was in the wind by sunrise.

Thom hitched a ride with a pair of coeds in a Volkswagen Thing and dozed several hours inland and north. The girls dropped her on the main street of a sprawling industrial town. She bought combat boots and a Leatherman knife at an Army-Navy Surplus store. That left eight dollars and change in her pocket. She initiated heavy eye-contact with two men browsing the camping section and the lady at the register. Nobody gave her a second glance.

Why had she traveled away from the ocean? She'd purchased the mansion for the view, the damp salt breeze, and the storms that lighted the entire house with sizzles of blue and white. The water appealed to some hindbrain desire; it beckoned with the seductiveness of an addiction. Thom was fed up to the gills with addiction. She vowed to keep putting miles behind her.

The eight bucks went on a burger, fries, and large coke. All that remained of her ill-gotten gains were two dimes, three pennies, and a business card she'd accidentally grabbed from Jules' wallet in the dark. Soiled, tattered, and reeking of hemp and whiskey, its logo was of a distorted hemisphere split as if by a cleaver.

The card read:

LIMBUS, Inc.

Are you laid off, downsized, undersized?

Call us. We employ. 1-800-555-0606.

How lucky do you feel?

Her body ached. She was destitute and essentially unemployable. World class modeling didn't prepare one for the blue-collar job market, although she'd probably pick up the art of doling five-dollar hand jobs at truck stops. No, she definitely didn't feel lucky.

Why not? whispered Plain Jane. *Instead of fish food in the Pacific, here you sit, digesting a burger in Downtown America in complete anonymity. We're living a charmed life. You should make the call. Wouldn't be the first time.*

Thom’s skin prickled as she threw the card away. She didn’t see it again for three weeks.

Interlude: Doomsday Variations

KRAKATOA (ALPHA CONTINUUM) RECORDING 6:

“Mr. (static), rise and shine.”

Lieutenant Burton pronounces my name with respectful venom, brings me home from dreamland. His voice is nasal. He’s come with my summons to an officer’s pow-wow. He’s checking me out, wondering if I’m too drunk for action.

Of course I’m drunk. I’ve been drunk going on three years. Best three years I’ve had since the world went tits-up, no contest.

I rise naked, loom over the lieutenant in his pressed olive uniform and shiny boots. I do it for the flinch. I’m not a giant—submarine cabins flatter me. That and everybody born after Doomsday tends to be short and sickly. Everybody born after Doomsday is a tin soldier or a Napoleon wannabe.

Unlike the merry crew, water rationing doesn’t apply to him. Burton bathes every morning; shaves too. Usually has a pithy remark at the ready. He’s steady in the face of imminent defeat. The British Empire could’ve used a chap of his caliber a couple centuries ago. His aplomb is entirely wasted on the mongrel elements that comprise the Republic of North America Expeditionary Forces.

Burton’s bland mask is slipping. His cheeks are rosy. He’s impatient to unlimber the murder machines. Finally, a chance to wreak havoc and I’m holding up the production.

I love to fuck with his mind. “Don’t fret. We’ve got, what, four warheads left? You’ll get to uncork one.” *I clap him on the shoulder as I squeeze by to rummage in my locker.*

Burton says, “We’ll be there soon.”

There *signifies a set of coordinates on the Black Sea. Except, since the continents are busted pieces of crockery, it’s not the Black Sea anymore, is it?* There *is a bone-yellow coast pocked with craters and smashed cities that once belonged to Russians, Bulgarians, and who cares—the nations*

and its peoples are extinct. Might as well be Mars. Nothing belongs to anybody anymore. Which means we aren't really anywhere.

Burton has a nervous tic of braiding his mustache. Our former lieutenant, a redoubtable lad named Jacoby, clicked a set of keys as if he were Captain Queeg made flesh. Jacoby disappeared on a survey mission six months ago. Fell into a crevasse. We threw him a hell of a wake, even better than the one we threw for his *predecessor. Right now Burton's braiding like crazy.*

I dress slowly, pulling on a loose, grey jumpsuit. As the only civilian aboard the Krakatoa*, I don't rate a cool uniform. We go see Captain Pizarro.*

Pizarro—the name sums him up. He's a real motherfucker. He's also a political liability. When the brass back home decided to track down the architect of an unpleasant radio signal originating halfway across the globe, they thought of him. And Pizarro thought of me. Makes sense. To hell with my amnesty for services rendered to the Republic. I've got skills to pay the bills.

Captain Pizarro is in a dandy mood. He's sitting there in his cramped office, stroking his goatee and smiling. He resembles the devil, in fact. "That'll do, Burt." *After he's dismissed our favorite lieutenant, he points at a chair and I sit. I notice a spool of surveillance photographs. Pizarro ignores them and studies me, clacking his Nova Skulls signet against the desk. The wood is burnished with antiquity, and matches the color of the Captain's skin.* "A drink, Mr. (static)?" *Those are the magic words.*

I'm looking at his ring and thinking how civilization has circled back to the dark ages, the other dark ages, that is. Mason, Mormon, Ancient Order of Hibernia—a man's got to belong to something. Cults are the order of the day. For instance, I know of two centered on my person, but I try to keep from getting a swollen head. It's mostly rumor, anyhow. Nobody's given me a scepter or a tiara or some nifty title like Grand Imperceptor of Lupines.

Captain Pizarro opens a cabinet and pulls down a bottle, does the honors. We clink tumblers of Tiger's Milk. He may be the head honcho, but my booze is superior. He swallows fast, bares his teeth. Those teeth are too white, too healthy. He's always smelled off kilter. This would bother me more under different circumstances. "To the good guys."

That's hilarious. I croak, "There ain't no good guys. There ain't no bad guys. There's just us chicken hawks."

Now he's nodding, as if anything I say bears the slightest relevance to his squirmy, homicidal brain. He plucks at the surveillance spool. "This is interesting recon. Anomalous structures, anomalous activity."

I examine the spool, because he pushes it under my nose. A muddy composite of whorls and lines. Some rocks that are probably hills, some jagged squiggles I take for buildings. Buildings with thermal blobs of grey inside. People. Shouldn't be any people here.

He pours another round. "The scientists are quitting on the Reconstruction."

"I don't talk to the scientists."

"No?" *Easy to see he doesn't buy that. He thinks I know something. Most people suspect me of being on the inside of some conspiracy or other.* "Well, they say humanity is done for and that Earth is dying. This Ice Age won't end for a thousand years. Unpleasant activity is occurring near the planet core. It might burst like popcorn on a griddle. Everything we're doing is pointless as boxing the Jesuit. You believe them?"

I push away the picture. "Don't know for certain, Captain. I don't think it's dying, though. More like it's going to sleep. Once we die off, she'll stir, refreshed and green. Just minus us parasites."

"Same difference."

"You got me."

"Going to sleep." *Pizarro muses happily.* "Best part is, it doesn't matter. Am I right? We get to keep on keeping on for the limit of our natural spans. Maybe bury a few time capsules for alien explorers. I wonder what I should put in mine."

"Parakeet bones. A monkey skull. Confuse the hell out of them."

Pizarro laughs. He even sounds sane. The cracks barely show. "I'm launching a PM operation tomorrow. Your attendance is requested."

"You summoned me to the sanctum sanctorum to tell me that?"

“No. The men fear your reputation. Every time I emerge from one of our tête-à-têtes uneaten, my own legend grows.”

“As you say, Captain.”

We finish our drinks and I’m headed through the door when he stops me. “Forgive a personal inquiry, Mr. (static). It is good to be a national hero, yes? Your atrocities are forgiven by a grateful populace.”

“Folks appreciate the talents of a murderer when his weapons are pointed at their enemies.”

“The sins of one generation become the fairytales of another. Do you regret shedding the aspect of the beast and dwelling in harmony among lesser men? Surely, you are tempted.”

“Tempted how?”

“To roam free. To shirk the oppressive obligations of an adoring public. To stalk and slay at your whim. To disappear into the wilderness forever.”

I gaze over his shoulder to the mouth of a cavern. A man lies curled around bloody bones. The wet pelt of a bear is his bedding. He chews a femur. A younger, leaner me. Rude of brow and jaw, but me where it counts.

“Honestly, Captain, I never think about those days.”

END RECORDING

Chapter 4 (Creely)

Isaac Creely visited the zoo for two reasons: he loved to tease the animals, which he did by mocking their captivity and enslavement. Especially the tigers and the monkeys. Some of his worst nemeses went on four legs or slithered in the grass. Rudyard Kipling possessed startling insights on that front, didn’t he? Reason the second: beasts were keen to his unusual scent and paid him a lot of attention, his taunts notwithstanding. They understood the hunt and exhibited a sympathetic response to his imminent peril that he could easily read. Professional man-catchers smelled and behaved a certain way, whether a freelancer or a government drone. Four-legged predators unerringly recognized their two-legged kin among the gawping crowds.

Recently he'd tasted danger on the wind. His instincts warned that someone was keeping tabs—the occasional prickle of the hair on his neck seldom lied.

The National Security Agency profile made numerous assumptions about him. Several were correct—a blind hog finds an acorn once in a while. Basically, analysts were shooting in the dark. Most intelligence agencies are relatively sanguine regarding the inexplicable. If it's not related to extraterrestrial (or extradimensional) life, and it's not contagious, or doesn't possess a dramatic upside for weaponization or profit, the powers-that-be prefer to conduct long range studies, file reports, and bury their findings in subcommittee minutes. In Creely's experience, action always circled back to the bottom line. The bottom line is a fragile outcome—an outcome negatively affected by the whims of nervous Nelly politicians and the ever present threat of public exposure.

Private operators were where a man had to watch his ass. Detective agencies, bounty hunters, mercenary outfits, and security firms. These organizations are usually funded by rich, overly-inquisitive (or acquisitive) types, and swarming with ex-law enforcement professionals from every three letter acronym in the book.

Creely had done a good job staying off the radar. Still, as one of his many fathers often opined, shit happens. A billionaire in France caught wind of his special qualities in 1964. The billionaire's number-one heavy was a retired Mossad agent: Arvad Gurion, the eldest son of a Nazi hunter. Creely wished Arvad had followed in the old man's footsteps. Arvad stalked Creely, evaluated his capabilities and vulnerabilities, and put him to sleep with a drugged cocktail, easy-peasy.

"I hope you are under no illusions," a silver-haired gentleman in a nice suit said to Creely. "You are a rat. You will endure torment and die. However, your contribution to science may prove to be important. Fingers crossed!"

Creely (Daniel Abernathy in those days) had awakened inside a padded cell. The man in the suit introduced himself (from the opposite side of a bulletproof pane of glass) as Dr. Beringer. Ironically, the good doctor proudly served the SS during the war. He and Arvad Gurion were quite

collegial. While his plasma made its way through an IV drip Creely had observed the men gambling at poker and sharing cigarettes.

The padded cell lay inside a bunker far beneath a jungle in Southeast Asia. Researchers conducted a battery of tests—physiological and psychological. Blood and semen were drawn. Bone marrow and spinal fluid. Arvad applied moderate physical force; the Israeli Military euphemism for torture. After forty months of abuse, Dr. Beringer injected Creely with an overdose of anesthesia and harvested his organs. The remains were incinerated along with most of the records. Non-essential staff took a bullet in the back of the head. The skeleton crew of scientists accepted obscene bank drafts and unvoiced threats in exchange for their eternal silence.

Creely's mind pulsed with a colossal tryptic of memories of his myriad deaths. Shot in war and love; disembowelment, strangulation, disease, senility, derangement, torn apart by hyenas, exsanguination, defenestration, drowning, starvation, bricked up in a cell, and countless other methods. This particular incident commemorated a first in his existence: he'd suffered torture and degradation directly related to his true nature.

A fresh-faced homicidal lunatic with a letter sweater, he sought vengeance during the next go around of the great wheel of karma. Sadly, he failed to exact recompense from either of the principal villains. The billionaire and Dr. Beringer died of natural causes in the summer of 1994 and 1996 respectively, thereby escaping a world of horrifying punishment. Creely tracked Arvad to a hospice in South Africa. The former intelligence agent had succumbed to dementia; cancer devoured his pancreas. Creely was forced to satisfy the debt by systematically hunting down and murdering the dozen or so technicians and assistant researchers who'd conducted the bunker experiments. One desperate technician said, *we were following orders!* as Creely bit off the man's fingers. This proved supremely hollow. Nightmares of his captivity persisted.

These bad memories drifted near the surface and caused him increasing anxiety. The snare might be tightening once more. Today at the Hurley Mountain Wildlife Refuge, he'd observed owls and raptors gone mad in their enclosures, and a pack of timber wolves pacing near the fence line, hackles bunched, somber gazes fixed upon him where he observed from the midst of a crowd.

A rabbit emerged from a hedge on the outer perimeter of the fence. Neither the crowd nor the wolves noticed Mr. Bunny. Creely did—the rabbit smiled at him and cleaned its paws.

Intrepid researchers at *Sima de los Huesos* dug up the smashed skull of a near-human primate that got himself clobbered about four-hundred and thirty-thousand years ago. Let's call the prehistoric dead guy Bill.

One of Creely's corporations funded a significant portion of the research. Curious individuals wouldn't read news reports of his generous contribution to science because nearly two dozen false fronts and dummy companies filtered the cash. The right people knew the score and his largesse bought a private viewing of the remains. Under museum-quality glass in a room closed off by velvet curtains. Soft lights, very romantic.

"Hello, Bill," Creely said after a few reverential moments. "I'm not sorry." He lit a cigarette to flaunt the secret of fire before any ancient ghost who might linger. "Goodbye and fuck you, amigo."

Mid-autumn of 1985, near sunset, Jim Conklin of Kingston, New York, shot a black bear. The bear shrugged off the 30.06 round and bolted into the woods. Conklin and his two hunting buddies gave chase. Although neither of the other men had seen a bear—Frank Smolko thought it was smaller, perhaps a wild boar; and Nick Reese thought maybe a dog. A big damned dog.

As darkness approached, Smolko and Reese voted to set camp and resume at dawn. The party had hiked into the Adirondacks the day prior and were far from any road or habitation. A man could get hurt or lost wandering the mountains during the dead of night. Add a wounded bear to the scenario and the odds of disaster became exponential. Conklin was hot to follow the blood trail by flashlight, but relented to common sense and the promise of a knapsack of beer.

The men pitched camp and made a bonfire. Reese cooked beans and bacon for supper. The beer disappeared by the time the waning moon peeped

through a cottony film of clouds. The hunters discussed football, the sorry state of the world, and their even sorrier jobs and marriages, and lamented that Smolko should've lugged more beer or a fifth of the hard stuff.

Smolko opened his mouth to crack wise. Instead, he pointed. "Oh, lordie, fellas."

A young man stood at the rim of the campfire glow. Naked and covered in blood. Not completely naked—he wore a leather necklace strung through a chipped fang.

"You got me, Tex. It'll be okay, though. Tom Waits told you, you need the right bullets." The kid uttered a coarse laugh and toppled, face-down. A nasty exit wound in his upper back had clotted. Leaves and dirt stuck to his body.

The men rushed to him and did what could be done under the circumstances. Reese cleaned the wound and applied a pressure bandage from Smolko's first aid kit. They wrapped the kid in a blanket and made him comfortable near the fire. He lay inert as a corpse. Sweat beaded upon his forehead. Occasionally his eyelids fluttered. Otherwise he might've been stone dead.

Conklin fell to his knees. He rocked, clutching his head, crossing himself, the whole bit. "God as my witness, I thought he was a bear. God as my witness." Somebody handed him the last can of beer and he drank it in a long gulp.

Smolko pulled Reese aside. "We can't move the kid until daybreak. Keep an eye on 'em. I'm gonna scout around a bit, see if he's got a camp nearby."

Reese didn't like the idea—they'd set camp to avoid this very activity. He understood the wisdom of Smolko's plan, however. The kid might have friends in the neighborhood and they'd need to know the situation. Smolko shouldered his rifle and set forth, guided by the fragile beam of his all-weather flashlight. He could've sworn the kid opened his eyes to watch him go; wrote it off as a trick of the light and jangling nerves.

Two hours later with nothing to show for tramping around the woods, Smolko decided to circle back to camp. He nearly tripped over the rotted porch of a tiny hunting shack. Moss camouflaged the cabin where its decayed bones nestled amid roots and rocks. Screened by brush, its ancient

foundation was sinking into the earth. No windows, no door—sockets and a toothless mouth.

Blood dried in patches on the soft ground and spackled ferns and beds of pale fungi. Smolko gagged at the reek of powerful musk. An animal had recently pissed virulent streams against the buckled planks.

Inside, roots erupted from floorboards. The floor made small hillocks where the earth had heaved. Condensation oozed from petrified rafters. The fireplace had collapsed. Doors had detached from empty cabinets. Pelts hung from the beams and were piled on the ground. Bear, coyote, deer, and other kinds. Some matted and moldering, some pristine. And among these trophies, a variety of bleached skulls lay scattered.

Smolko felt as if he'd ducked into the heart of a beast's cave lair. Although that didn't quite fit—stick figure men and animals were carved into the walls, and half-moons and crudely depicted constellations. He recalled cave drawings from history class and magazine photographs.

On closer inspection, he realized several of the skulls were human. One of the hides was too wrinkly and strange for any critter he'd seen; the skin dangled like a pair of hooded long johns. Ultimately, a rusted can chock full of driver licenses sent him scrambling from the death cabin. He charged in the general direction of camp, bellowing and firing the rifle into the sky.

Somewhere in the dark, Smolko tripped. He broke his leg and split his head open. He lay unconscious for forty-eight hours, maybe longer, then crawled for three days, utterly lost and raving in fevered delirium. A pair of off duty state troopers heard something rustling in the bushes and discovered him. He screamed and fought until they bound him with duct tape at wrist and ankle and lugged him back to civilization.

Search teams never found hide nor hair of Conklin, Reese, nor the mysterious kid. Cops located the shack, burnt to ashes. Years later, after he'd descended into a drunken shambles of the family man who'd gone hunting that weekend, Smolko told anybody who'd listen that busting his leg and going into a two-day coma had saved his hide, so to speak.

While dying of cirrhosis in a hospice in 2006, he grabbed a nurse by the sleeve and told her he'd seen Satan the day the troopers loaded him into a trailer behind their ATV.

“Lucifer stood beside a tree as we pulled away on that old trail. The young guy Jim shot. Naked as a jaybird and fondling that fang at his neck. Covered in gore, head to toe. Blew me a kiss.”

Authorities should have known there was something rotten in Stone Ridge. The stink, thinly masked by the perfume of affluence, wafted from the venerable Creely estate. Savaged cattle; dead hookers; the occasional mutilated deer hunter; and a handful of overheated eyewitness accounts of a big cat or a bigger wolf roaming the mid-Hudson Valley with evil intent. Cops are overworked and under motivated, not stupid. Sheriff Oakland, for example, had a feeling in his gut that spoiled his appetite on several occasions. The sheriff rolled by in his cruiser some late nights and wondered what debauchery or murder might be transpiring by the light of the moon. He slowed, slowed, and kept on rolling homeward to take it out on poor Mrs. Oakland (who nightly came a tick closer to unloading on him with the .32 she stashed under her pillow).

Here’s the thing—nobody gives a damn about cows, hookers, or the occasional hunter who gets tagged back by Mother Nature. Even if some eager beaver on the outside took a shine to the weird goings-on, an investigation would’ve been stonewalled in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.

Isaac Creely, at the onset of heroic middle age, belonged to old, old money, and had lived, as three generations before him, his entire life in Ulster County, New York with various excursions around the world as jet setting playboys are wont, nay, required, to assay. He donated wads of that old, old money heavily to strategic causes. His private investigators were the best that old, old money could buy, and these worthies periodically dug up a bit of dirt on the local power players. Cops and politicians loved him and hated him. Most importantly, they feared what he might tell if provoked.

Creely also threw fabulous, opulent parties.

The ballroom emptied as the gala wound down. High-tone guests, liquored nicely, and in some cases, a smidgeon past the line, kissed their host or shook his hand, and swayed red-faced into the night. Soon, a procession of

taillights flickered on the long private drive leading from the estate and toward Highway 209.

A team of servants began cleaning with military precision.

Creely filled a tuxedo nicely; mandatory for men of his social status. He kept his hair (black and shot through with the first streaks of white) trimmed in an expensive cut the Golden Age of comic books artists favored during the height of the cold war. Steely eyes, square jaw, thick neck, and a swimmer's body. When he loosened that Brooks Brothers tie it wouldn't have surprised his more observant admirers to catch a glimpse of spandex with an S or a stylized bat blazoned across his chest.

"Self-made man is a misnomer," he said as the blonde ran her hands over him. Expensive fabric; a muscled body, sleek and smooth as only money can supply. What wasn't to like?

"Misnomer?" she said.

"Misnomer."

"How did you get this?" She touched a bullet scar on his left shoulder.

"Hunting accident."

"Brutal. The sport of kings isn't a game for the hunted, is it?"

He tried to determine what sort of animal she'd be in an animated film or after a different, less fortunate draw in the genetic lottery. "I inherited everything. The money, of course. A network of powerful allies and subordinates. Enemies, too. Mother and Father were beautiful. Grandfather could've been a supermodel if they'd had those in the forties." The woman (Minnie? Mandy?) nipped his chin as she worked his shirt buttons. A fox? Why not? "You're foxy." He slurred ever so slightly despite the fact he'd nursed exactly one martini the entire evening. Force of habit; it was usually best to keep colleagues and lovers off balance. Always best to have the edge, the half step advantage, because one could never be entirely sure what might happen next in the wild, wild kingdom.

They rolled around on a billiards table. Creely had chosen her from a throng of women vying for his attention like doves cooing on a sill. He enjoyed her scent; she didn't use much perfume or hair spray. She radiated a feral heat that intrigued and intoxicated him. He licked her belly and tasted

traces of coconut lotion and pheromones. Orgasm (a few seconds or an eternity) contracted his consciousness, then expanded rapidly and shattered like a piece of crystal fracturing into a blizzard of tiny revolving universes. He relived every climax in his lengthy existence. The outward expression of this transcendent moment was a dilation of his pupils, a mild shudder, and the tightening of his fist in her hair.

"There are three kinds," he said. "Men who turn into animals at the sight of the moon or blood. Animals who go on two legs. And men who are wholly themselves."

"What kinds of women are there?"

"There's only one kind."

She dug her nails into his biceps and stared, glazed-eyed, at the lamp shining upon them like a crimson sun. The crimson sun burned the top of his skull…

…When he opened his eyes again, gelid red light shone through the mouth of a cave and dripped from icicles. Wisps of smoke lingered in a fire pit. He lay upon frozen ground and knew it was real, yet not real, and felt the killing cold nonetheless. A mantle of mammoth hide wrapped his shoulders; his flint-toothed spear leaned against a rock. Petroglyphs scored the walls of the cave. The figures of men and animals told a story, a saga. He'd forgotten the saga across the eons as his brow flattened and his jawline receded, except in snatches during his Technicolor dreams, but the sweet, rude memory of it filled his mind instantly as the smoke from the fire pit curled into his nostrils. Tears froze his lashes.

Withered from the toll of a relentless winter and malnutrition, he'd also broken his legs. The accident occurred as he pursued an elk herd across ice sheets. Fellow hunters plunged into a sudden abyss, dying before they could scream. He'd fallen onto a ledge and eventually climbed free despite massive injuries. His hands and arms were powerful, even here at the end.

A useless gesture. Crawling wouldn't keep him alive for long, nor had he much reason to struggle besides stubbornness. As the snows spread from the mountains, his own mate and children had gone to sleep one by one, never to awaken. Broken and alone, mind full of darkness, belly full of ache, the long sleep was welcome. The bifurcation of his consciousness, the

ancient headwaters and the new tributary, altered his perspective into strange and terrifying permutations. His animalistic cries toward inchoate, primordial forces of judgment were translated into contemporary terms after a tiny lag. He beheld himself as proto-man and modern man, freezing and dying, warm and well-fucked. He could almost reconcile the gulf, except myriad other fractured selves from a myriad fractured shards of reality impinged upon his awareness. Whiteness greater than any blizzard overtook him and he was lost in the thing that resides behind the curtain of death.

It had been this way for epochs.

He surfaced into the present. He gasped for breath.

"Oh my god." The blonde's thighs locked around his waist and it hurt. Her expression suggested she too had traveled far. The billiard table transformed into a flat rock draped in furs.

She bit his neck like she was a lioness chomping into a gazelle.

Interlude: Doomsday Variations

NARRATORS UNK (BETA CONTINUUM) RECORDING 4:

"Item A: Transhumanism occurs concomitant with a sequence of intellectual and scientific breakthroughs. A newly discovered deep cavern in France contains heretofore unimagined and unparalleled petroglyphs and color paintings. 'Junk' DNA code within members of the research team are activated. The resultant contagion is transmitted via physical contact. Later, visual contact suffices. The transference range is unlimited. A recorded image is no less virulent than a live image…"

"Item B: Rapid mutations within the human genome initiate profound psychological and biochemical changes. In a nutshell, we grow exponentially smarter. The sum of humanity's knowledge doubles every nine days. Cycles of catastrophic violence and catatonic hibernation alternate. Previously inconceivable advances in technology materialize from active dream states…"

"Item C: The Singularity is a horror that exceeds direst predictions.

"Alien megastructure is made of bones. The quantum drone shot forth to take a look. The pilot began to scream when she grasped the structure's

composition…”

“I trained for marathons and would get so exhausted, I’d hallucinate spiders carving messages into leaves. My wife understood—she thought the owls at the campground were reporting our location to the bears. We visited this park in Portland. A homeless guy told us to beware the murderer stalking the bike paths. My headlamp died and when it came back on, the dude had a hatchet in his hand…”

“Gazing into the abyss of the 8 ball… all possibilities resolve to three likely outcomes—happy and uneventful until old age; war of the roses and bitterness; a horror that I have seen but must not say.”

“A Gray—12 feet tall, potbellied, blandly malevolent. Dropped down onto the road in front of my truck. Out in the pasture were the dead cattle. Couldn’t see ’em in the gloom, but their blood hung thick on the air…”

“The signal is dark matter pouring from the heart of the sun. That scream is dark matter pouring from the wound in his face…”

“People’s eyes milked over. A complete black or white shell, and their bodies hardened into a semi-flexible plastic. We called them Retches on account of how they changed. For example: My third grade teacher, Mr. Sheffield, was the first I seen. In the middle of reading us a chapter from *Pinocchio,* he stopped dead and his eyes got big behind his glasses. He gagged like a cat with a hairball and turned red and did a face-plant on the floor. Thin carpet over concrete equals a busted nose and smashed glasses…”

“Eight years old, dude. I never saw anybody cough up a spleen before…”

“The whole class freaked, right? Becky Heath screamed and didn’t stop to take a breath. She started the dominoes tumbling. A *lot* of kids screamed. Nobody ran, though, because we’d had an active shooter drill (they referred to it as something more kid-friendly) the day before and the rule was you stayed in your room when it went down. We froze…”

“Mr. Sheffield did the funky chicken for fifteen or twenty seconds and barfed his insides. Suddenly, he climbed to his feet and looked at us, real calm and collected. The lenses of his glasses were cracked and that made the blackness of his eyes weirder. He leaned against his desk and opened *Pinocchio* and started reading from the beginning. His voice sounded

strange, too. Nothing as strange as the loop of intestine hanging down his shirt next to his Bugs Bunny tie…"

"The week before her eyes went opaque, Thommy girl told me a secret. She said, *There are so many worlds, so many variations.…"*

END RECORDING

Chapter 5 (Jane 2.0)

For their first date, Jane suggested drinks at a spot on the east side of Kingston. The Reading Lodge was a pile of brick and timber sandwiched between two historic neighborhoods on a ridge above the river, but set back far enough there wasn't much of a view of the water. During certain seasons locals flocked to the Reading: spring, when love and lust were on the wind and the world was new; and fall, when the trees were red and gold and brown and the hot days and crisp nights were the bitter and the sweet and a couple could hold hands and gaze out at a full, yellow moon. Otherwise the Reading brooded on its slope, melancholy and quiet, haunted by a diminished staff and a handful of regulars and the occasional tourist.

"I kind of stopped screwing around after I watched *Nights of Cabiria*," Jane said.

"Did that film frighten you?" Renzo said. He sipped a cold vodka. The tips of his fingers caused condensation to pearl on the glass. In the soft light of the lounge, against the backdrop of the walnut sided booth, his flaws were blunted. Pockmarks and a swarthy complexion made his skin vellum, lent it a peculiar reverse-luminescence.

"I dated a guy from Florence, said he'd come into some money, although I bet he was lying through his teeth. I think he was actually a ne'er-do-well. Forgot his wallet on a regular basis. Too much of a coincidence for me. I lost his number and stayed in on Friday and Saturday nights for a couple months."

"*Nights of Cabiria* and not *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*? You are a connoisseur of foreign films, perhaps?"

"Diane Keaton never moved me. My mother adored her. And Meryl Streep." She drew a cigarette and waited for him to lift the candle in its

marbled glass bowl and light it. The Reading had a no-smoking policy that wasn't enforced during the offseason.

"Ah. I am a generation removed from my homeland. I despise Fellini. Nothing is real with him. Fantasy and hysterical people shouting."

"Where are your parents from?"

"The Old World."

"How old?"

"Papa put an atlatl in my hand and said, go kill that thing with pointy bits and sharp hooves."

Jane laughed. Her lipstick was deep red. She'd dyed her hair blonde. She knew many of the women in her circle were mildly jealous of her lips and her hair, the fact she'd kept her figure and her clean skin. The power of that knowledge was good, like sex in the glow of a mellow drunk. She was on her second margarita and the bartender made them strong as sin. She'd taken the bartender home once. He'd gotten heavier lately. His gin blossoms, the pouches beneath his eyes, proof he availed himself too much from the company store, that his ship hadn't come in. These days they pretended to be strangers.

She said, "Okay, wiseacre. What do you do?"

"I'm a warlock."

"Come again?"

"Sorry, I meant… how do you say, a magician."

"You're a magician?"

"I was a magician. Once."

"Oooh—how interesting! Rabbits and cards? Beautiful assistants in sequined cabaret outfits?"

"Yes, of course."

"You are the first magician I've known. Show me a trick."

"I regret to say those days are behind me. I am officially retired."

"Once a magician, always a magician."

"Alas, I have hung up my magic hat for good."

“Aww, c’mon. Something small, then.”

“What makes you sure I am not already doing something?”

“Be that way, then,” she said in a mock pout.

“Okay, forget magic. I also do what you call, uh, impressions. Disguises.” He screened his face with a placemat and hunched his shoulders. A few seconds later, he lowered the mat and revealed the snarling, red-eyed visage of a Cro Magnon. “Ta-da!”

“Holy shit.” The effect caused Jane to scoot her chair backward a few inches.

Renzo laughed. He relaxed about a hundred muscles and pulled wads of napkin from his mouth and gradually settled into himself once more. “I admire Lon Chaney Jr. He inspired me to study special effects for film.”

“Excuse me.” She exhaled and shook her head. “That’s… Well, it’s amazing. Sorry to jump. It’s just—I’ve never seen anyone transform themselves without makeup, or whatever. Whoo boy, I need a drink.” She gulped her margarita and signaled the server for a fresh one. “Since you’ve retired from the magic biz, what now?”

“I travel abroad. I have reinvented myself as a naturalist.”

“A fan of Thoreau?”

“I am more socially inclined than Mr. Thoreau. Nor do I write essays. I simply observe.” He raised his drink and sipped without breaking eye contact.

“Since you haven’t asked, I’ll just tell you: I’m the administrative assistant to the director of human resources in the Olympia School District.”

“That is a fine job. Very noble to serve as an educator.”

“I’m the director’s personal secretary. We don’t really work in education.”

Renzo reached across the table and took her hand. “You have money,” he said, turning her wrist slightly as if to read her palm. “You drive a new Mercedes.”

“Money? My second husband certainly did. He’s dead. Bad ticker.” Jane had calmed down enough that she didn’t mind Renzo touching her. His

fingers were damp and cool from the glass. “There isn’t a lot left. Husband the Last was a swindler. Lucky for me, I got out before it was too late.”

“Perhaps this is a trend, your attraction to swindlers and confidence men.”

“My shrink asked me the same question.”

“How did you escape the tentacles of your swindler husband? Did you shoot him?” He smiled.

“No! God, no. Silly man. I admit, it was tempting…”

“You are to be congratulated for your restraint.” He stroked her fingers. His dark eyes were off-kilter, almost crossed, but compassionate. How could a girl not go for a man with compassionate eyes?

“The Mercedes is six years old, by the way.”

“I don’t care about cars.”

Jane smoked her cigarette and looked at his hand covering hers. “Well, Renzo, are you after my money?”

“It doesn’t sound as if you have any.”

“Don’t tell my girlfriends. They love to hate me for my wealth and privilege. I fly to the Bahamas or the Mediterranean often enough to keep up appearances. Drives them mad. They don’t know it’s a timeshare, ha-ha.”

“I don’t care about money, either,” Renzo said. His eyes steadied as he focused on hers with a languorous intensity she associated with Latin lovers of Oxygen Network cable specials and overwrought Mexican soap operas.

“Wow,” Jane said, knocked a bit loopy from the wallop of her last margarita and the hot and sexy eye contact. She fanned herself with the plastic drink menu. The longer she studied his face, the more it sank in that Renzo wasn’t what she might charitably term plain, or even homely. As her brother the Marine was fond of saying, this guy had been beaten with the ugly stick. And he was shorter than her. Yet, yet… “Goodness, it’s warm in here.”

Renzo relaxed and allowed his hands to rest on his half of the table. He smiled kindly which did wonders to redeem his damaged skin, the unfortunate asymmetry of his features. “Isn’t that what the undercover

policewoman says in the movie to signal for reinforcements? There's always some kind of code word." He made a show of scanning the lounge and its shadowy corners. "Are you wearing a wire?"

"Wanna see for yourself?"

He tilted his head. His hair was black and thick, except near the top where it thinned and light glimmered on his scalp. "The hour is late. You should go home and sleep. It is a work night, yes?"

"Um. I've heard that one in a movie too. *The Brush-Off*." Jane realized she was tapping her foot. She always tapped her foot when nervous or pissed. Too close to call in this case.

"Never."

"You think I'm drunk." She heard the petulance creeping in and winced.

"Oh, I *know* you are drunk. If I took you home in this condition, it would hardly be fair."

She raised her eyebrows, but he wasn't looking—he summoned a waiter and asked for the check, and would the fellow be so good as to ring a taxi for Ms. Holt? Jane wanted to protest on principle, yet Renzo was classically gallant and getting cuter by the second. She reached into her bag for her keys, saw he was already handing them to the waiter for safe-keeping. *Omigod! He is a magician!* Pleasantly nonplussed, she cupped her chin in both palms and gazed at him with something akin to adoration.

"Thank you for not asking," he said after they paid for their drinks and waited in the lobby. His limp would've been impossible to miss. He dragged his left foot like a convict towing a ball and chain. His left shoe was much larger than his right. "Always they ask. I do not mind, of course."

She looked down at her purse, uncertain of what to say, if anything.

"Congenital birth defect," he said. "I am fortunate. You should see my brothers. Their necks…" He tapped her nose and smiled mischievously. "That is a bit of comedy. Laugh if you wish."

And she did, mostly out of relief.

As he helped her into the taxi, she clumsily assayed to slip her card into his pocket. He kissed her cheek and promised to be in touch. He smelled of lime aftershave, faint musk, and her cigarette smoke. The night was starless

and the sparsely lighted exterior of the Reading Lodge floated as if upon the surface of a midnight lake. As the taxi rolled from the curb, she craned her neck to watch him become a black shape against a yellow-blaze in the entrance.

Every second Thursday, Jane, or her best girlfriend Naomi Baker, hosted an informal ladies-only get-together for coworkers and close friends. This Thursday it was Naomi's turn to hold court at her chalet at the edge of a lovely subdivision in the hills near Rosendale. Mr. Harold Baker was away on a business trip and the kids had been packed off for a long weekend. Naomi pulled out the stops with a crate of California wine, *hors d'oeuvres* and a stack of board games and DVD films. Friday was an in-service for teachers in the district, but most of the guests had already decided to call in sick so they could stay up drinking and gossiping until dawn.

The party was coming along nicely. Geraldine Peirce volunteered to get everyone started with drinks. Someone put on one of Naomi's conspicuous stack of mix CDs. The Stones and Jimi Hendrix and Cat Stevens were pulling the soul train, although the younger girls like Mattie Dalzell and Sarah Lynch and Grace Ring would've doubtless preferred more contemporary music—John Legend, Christina Aguilera, or the Pussycat Dolls.

While they were preparing snack platters, Jane bit the bullet and confessed her attraction to the loveably homely Mr. Renzo, he of the puppy dog eyes and male pattern balding and the quaint enunciations.

"Jeezus—guy's got a clubfoot?" Naomi said.

Jane shushed her with a venomous glance. She slid a knife from the block and began chopping celery to cover their exchange from the rest of the women who'd congregated between the kitchen and the living room. Not that that crowd was likely to notice. The girls were laughing at one of Carrie Peabody's sarcasm-laced anecdotes. Carrie's voice cut through the din like an off-key violin stroke. "Keep it down, would you? It's not a big deal."

"Oh, yeah?" Naomi popped an olive into her mouth. "You sure?"

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just asking. You brought it up.”

“I’m sorry, trust me. You got any carrots; I didn’t see any. Stop eating the olives.”

Naomi smirked, her hip thrust against the counter, another olive poised to her lips. “Renzo who? What’s his game? What kinda car does he drive?”

“Valente, Rutigliano, damn it, I can’t recall off the top of my head. He *does* have a last name. He said he’s retired. I didn’t ask about his car.”

“Yeah, yeah. Where’d you meet Mr. Mystery?”

“Church.” Jane’s face burned. Her armpits itched with sweat. She loved Naomi, but the girl knew how to get under her skin.

“Don’t be bitchy, El. He sounds nice. He pay?”

“We went Dutch. My idea. He is nice, though. I met him at Kurt and Winnie’s wedding last spring. Seen him around a few times since. We were standing in line at the video store and started talking…”

“It’s like a Julia Roberts fairytale,” Naomi said. “Minus you being a whore, of course. Oh, wait a minute. At Kurt and Winnie’s wedding? That little swarthy guy in the suit from the ’40s—”

“He’s Italian. His suits are tailored.”

“Holy shit. Really? That guy? The wallflower?”

“What? You expect him to dance with his foot, uh, you know.”

“Sarah talked to him at the reception. She thought he was super awkward. Afraid of girls, maybe. Flaky.” Naomi made vague hand gestures to express the magnitude of flakiness their friend Sarah had observed.

“You blame him for being afraid of Sarah?” Jane said, and laughed. “Get a couple shots in her and look out. She’d eat the poor man alive.”

“But that guy. Jeezus, Jeezus. Personality is ninety percent of everything, right? Does that mean you’ve kicked Pete what’s-his-name to the curb?”

“I haven’t burned any bridges.” In fact, Pete Wharton had texted Jane at work that very morning. Pete was a loan officer. Tall, lean, and moderately intelligent, an animal in bed, and he seemed genuine enough. She hadn’t allowed herself to get attached—she figured he’d be headed for financial

and emotional skid row once his quasi-divorce finalized. His homemaker wife was a barracuda and there were three children involved. Nope, any relationship with him would be a disaster movie in the making. She'd been sure to keep her hand on the ripcord of the parachute.

"Naughty-naughty," Naomi said.

"No, I'm smart. Girl's gotta have an escape plan."

"Can't argue with you there, sweetie. I'm jealous as hell. Your Latin lover's got sexy eyes. Gotta hand him that."

They lugged the platters into the living room where the other girls had begun to adjourn in two's and three's and flop on Naomi's decidedly '70s mod couches and overstuffed chairs. Gracie Ring and Lucy Allen had endeavored to build a fire in the massive rock fireplace. Sparks jumped against the screen as heavy gusts shook the windows. The weather service predicted a decent-sized storm to blow through the mid-Hudson Valley later that night.

When the chandelier flickered, Lucy Allen and Debra Mulholland uttered primal yips and Carrie Peabody muttered an obscenity Jane didn't quite catch, but Mattie Dalzell must've because she laughed a bit shrilly.

"Think any of your damned trees are gonna crash through the roof?" Carrie Peabody said to Naomi. "One a those old growth sycamores would split this house right down the middle."

"Yeah, Baker, you should clear-cut your property," Lauren Bloomfield said. No secret she despised Carrie Peabody. The pair worked in separate houses at the school and were frequently at professional loggerheads. They'd antagonized one another since grade school. When it came to those two, the Doom Clock was perpetually one minute before midnight and their assured mutual destruction.

This ceased to matter three minutes later.

Naomi sent Jane upstairs to snag candles and a spare flashlight in case the power died. Jane didn't even bother to hit the light switch—she and Naomi smoked out in the master bedroom plenty over the years. She glanced through the window near her friend's bedside dresser. Branches whipped and sycamore leaves and pine needles whirled through the beam of security

lighting. The swimming pool hadn't been covered and its water seethed greenish-white. Odd that Naomi hadn't covered it, considering the weather.

A black shape, larger and thicker than a man, lay at the bottom near the center. She blinked and had the horribly preposterous image of a drowned bear. Some kind of animal, surely, and not drowned, because even as she tried to make sense of the situation, the creature drifted or crawled along the bottom until it reached the edge. The shape gathered itself and heaved to the surface—

"Do you think anyone is really named Renzo?" Thom said from the opposite corner of the bedroom. Voluptuous, assured, pale as cold cream, she lurked in the gloom. "Do you think anyone could see past the façade to the vulnerable heart of you? Oh, babe, even a guy with a clubfoot could do better."

Jane hadn't seen reckless, feckless Thom since when, yet the sight of her, the faint smell of her perfume, the wry bite of her words, brought it back instantly.

Glass shattered downstairs. The sliding patio door not breaking, but exploding. The women shrieked and an animal growled.

"Harry keeps a shotgun in the closet," Thom said. "You've seen it." Shadows and light moved across her cheek and through it. Her voice came from a deep well.

Yes, Jane knew about the shotgun. Guns were the devil; she'd always hated them, the death penalty, and US foreign adventures. Nonetheless, two of three ex-husbands hunted. Husband the third considered himself a bit of a collector. Inevitably, she learned a thing or two about firearms.

She retrieved the shotgun and fumbled with the safety.

Thom said from even farther away, "Orange means that bad boy is ready to fire, so okay. Push in the tab on the side and pull the slide back. You're good, you're hot."

Jane sat on the bed with the barrel aimed at the door. Her hands shook and it proved difficult to hold the gun steady. She said, "I've been here before."

"Or somewhere like it, babe. I just remembered. This won't work. You were supposed to do something else."

“What?” Jane said through gritted teeth.

“Hark, the screams are over. He’s on his way. Sayonara.” Thom stepped backward into darkness.

The stairs groaned beneath a ponderous weight. The intruder’s passage was attended by crashes of upended vases and the clink and clatter of framed photographs swept from the wall.

A long shadow of awfulness flowed across the threshold, followed by the stink of blood and shit mingled with chlorine. The man of Jane’s dreams rushed through the doorway. Pieces of the women were papered to his massive torso like a collage. His clubfoot no longer appeared to afflict him.

Jane squeezed the trigger. The shotgun lit the room with an orange flash and its report deafened her. She was still frantically working the slide when he clambered upright and sprang toward the bed.

“What was the other thing I should’ve done?” A rhetorical question as her severed head smashed the window and splashed into the pool. She didn’t hear the resultant howl of victory and sorrow.

Interlude: Doomsday Variations

KRAKATOA (ALPHA CONTINUUM) RECORDING 7:

…Reynolds pilots the skiff in heavy swells. Five men cling to the gunwales. Lt. Burton kneels in the bow, impeccable as an Emperor penguin.

Krakatoa *recedes in our silvery wake. Not many nuclear submarines left. Not many submarines, period. Fewer kids are born each year, which means fewer people are coming along to rebuild the technological gadgets lost defending the Republic’s meager territory. From what the intelligence community gathers, life isn’t a whole lot rosier anywhere. I think the scientists are on the money—things are going downhill in a hurry for us primates. Could be time for me to associate more intimately with another species. Trilobites may be on the comeback trail. There’s also the extraterrestrials to consider…*

Stars blink on. The great sulfuric fogbanks have diminished in the last decade to the point where we can chart some constellations with the naked eye. Belts of cold fairy dust sweep in all directions.

Gerard crosses himself. Young guy, doesn't talk much. Clutches his rifle like it's a buoy. Him and Abram are the muscle. Flannigan, Enoch, and Rialto are corpsman, communications, and demolitions respectively. None of them are happy to be this close to a hole in space and none of them are happy to be touring what I figure is a modern village of the damned. Everybody's pale and stinks of adrenaline.

We land without incident, unload the equipment. Reynolds waves bye-bye and jets. We've sixteen hours to conduct the recon mission and rendezvous for extraction. If we aren't on schedule, Pizarro will order a crater made of the environs. SOP, baby, SOP.

I hang around to observe Enoch and Rialto assemble the robots. Robots and androids were the latest Big Thing right before the end. Lots of them ran on micro-batteries or solar power. The latter didn't do so well during the nuclear winter. Now that the dust has settled, they're back in style. Anything still running is back in style. The archeologists unearth lethal junk every day, yet it's impossible to meet the demand.

Lud and Caine are top of the line military hardware. The kind of hardware the folks at the Pentagon used to keep under their hats. The robots are comprised of millions of individual subatomic machines that when inert assume the mass of a golf ball. One flick of the switch causes them to telescope into a conglomeration of pods and stalks approximately three meters high. Their exoskeletons are of a plasti-rubber alloy, similar to our own battle suits, which are impervious to small arms fire and light explosives and change color to match terrain.

Lud and Caine possess brains, I am told. Rialto and Enoch control them by voice from headsets. Magic, I say. Whatever the case, the robots are handy. They slice. They dice. They collect data and warn us if we're wandering too close to a hot zone. Most of the hot spots have cooled and our suits are equipped with sensors and filters out the ying-yang. Never can be too careful, however.

Rialto unleashes Caine, sends it skittering off the beach and over the ridgeline to the southwest. Lud trails. The men disappear after them.

Burton gives the robots and their handlers a head start and then signals us to follow. Our squad emerges from a steep draw onto rocks above a natural

amphitheater. At the bottom I pick out prefabricated houses, the lines of a larger building sunken into the limestone hillside. Swear to god it almost looks like a box store from the 2010s. Sodium lamps flicker under a pall of gray and green mist—beyond the mist are flashes of pure blue sky.

Rialto and Gerard will return soon with the news. We're operating under radio silence. My hackles are up. There is wrong and there is super-duper two-ply wrong. This is the latter…

Chapter 6 (Thom)

A deserted outlet mall squatted on the opposite side of the highway. Lights in the parking lot came on as the late afternoon gloom thickened. The sky cracked and released a torrent. God's creatures great and small sought refuge wherever they could. Graffiti covered the inner arch of the overpass. Gang tags, guerilla art, Banksy-style pop culture critiques, and a sequence of numbers sprayed in red:

1-800-555-0606

CALL HOME, TJ

Thom lay propped against the ragged sidewall of a blown tire. She'd diminished to a skeleton in rags. Fever eagerly licked her bones, desirous of her sinews and marrow. Crows roosted upon a forgotten shopping cart and pecked in the moist earth near her unstrung bootlaces.

Three weeks wandering the USA byways hadn't ended well. She'd gotten shifts as a dishwasher and landed a gig as night clerk at a motel. Five nights ago an unreasoning fear sent her from behind the motel counter and flying into the night. South and south toward the coast, although she couldn't have explained the compulsion any more than she understood what had caused her to flee it in the first place. Nightmares destroyed her sleep and inflicted waking sickness; fever and shakes. Her meager cash evaporated and she went hungry. She crawled beneath the overpass to sleep and possibly die.

She hallucinated the suicide dive into the ocean led to a tour of the deeps. She piloted the Jaguar as a submarine, its headlights cutting through silty fog. She navigated red and green mountain reefs and jungles of kelp,

descending into a trench. The car melted and she progressed into a cold darkness. The crushing pressure meant nothing. The cold and the dark meant nothing. Her pain and fear subsided, replaced by a smooth and vaguely contemptuous diffidence for such petty concerns.

A ringing phone penetrated the depths and buoyed her to consciousness and the wracking chills and the odors of fermented garbage. Thom had spied the phone case mounted to a concrete slab and dismissed it as an emergency unit for 911. Usually such phones were installed on long bridges and remote terminals. The placement beneath the overpass seemed odd, but in her delirium she didn't give it a second glance until it rang for five minutes straight.

"Aren't you going to answer? Might be important." Plain Jane looked older since they'd last crossed paths. Left eye blacked, she wore a form-fitting dark blue jumpsuit that gave her the aura of an Olympic skier or a superhero.

"Jane, you're hurt." Thom had to make an effort to form the words.

"I'm T.J. Manson. Call me Manson." Manson winked and extended her hand. "The shiner happened next week and it's no concern of yours. Anyway, if Thom can't come to the mountain…" She lifted Thom easily and supported her. "First order of business, answer the phone." She half-carried Thom to the phone, opened the security box and put the receiver in her hand.

"Hello, Thom," a woman said. "I appreciate your taking a moment to speak with me."

Thom allowed Plain Jane to support her weight. The voice on the phone sounded familiar. "We've… we've spoken before."

"At length during your junior year in college. Wonderful conversations regarding your hopes and dreams."

"I wish I remembered. You helped me. Saved me."

The woman laughed pleasantly. "We assisted you in choosing the correct path. The credit for success belongs to you alone." After a long silence, she said, "Excellent that our talks bore fruit. You certainly left your mark on popular culture. Of greater importance, you awakened to your true

potential. Partially, to be sure. There's a final step, Thom. It's okay to be afraid. Fear, indeed terror, is your birthright."

Thom held on tight to consciousness. The smell of the ocean grew powerful. Twilight pulsed brighter then darker. "I don't know what to do."

"There's only one thing to do," the woman on the phone said. "Be yourself. Goodbye, Thom. Everyone here at Limbus extends their best."

Manson lifted Thom in her arms and walked swiftly uphill and onto the overpass. There were no headlights, only a bruising rain and empty lanes that vanished into shadow. Roaring began in the distance. Water crossed the plain and covered everything except for their strip of road. Points of manmade light extinguished. Soon nothing of civilization remained beyond the ditches. Water and steam, rising. The sky tore like a piece of construction paper and the stars peeled aside.

Thom laid her head against Manson's shoulder. The voice she'd heard on the other end of the line had been her own.

Ahead, a metal tower shot up from the horizon like some god's pointillism —the width and height of a skyscraper, smooth and featureless. It siphoned the faded sunset. Light glowed upon the metal and turned it gold and red and black.

Manson jogged. Her boots splashed.

Later, in the dim, sulfurous light of a metal cavern, Manson introduced Thom to her prisoner. The prisoner crouched next to a frigid lagoon. He was chained at the ankle. Manson kicked his feet until he toppled. She put her boot on his neck. He struggled and his considerable muscles bulged to no avail.

Manson said, "This man has a thousand names. He is your son and a corruption."

Thom cried silently. The tears burned. "I don't know him."

"Yes, yes, you do. Look harder. Look into his mean little eyes. You know this fucker."

"No." The tears burned. Smoke hissed from her blouse. "Wait. Do I?"

Manson nodded. “It’s not even a memory. It’s part of your DNA.”

Despite her sickness and confusion, that felt right. She regarded the stranger and a sour antipathy oozed from a recess of her soul. She knew him, hated him. His burgeoning fear-stink pleased her.

Manson bent and unlocked the prisoner’s ankle shackle.

The man reacted with alacrity. He slipped sideways into the lagoon. His form shifted to that of something large and aquatic and vanished. Thom screamed in rage and lunged toward the water. Redness overwhelmed her senses.

“I apologize,” Manson said as she jabbed Thom’s neck with a needle and pumped in a frightening dose of elephant tranquilizer. She lowered the woman to the ground and stroked her cheek. “We’ll see him again. I promise.”

“That does it,” Thom said as her eyes rolled back. “You’ll be sorry. Every one of you.” She snored.

“Promise,” Manson said.

Interlude: Doomsday Variations

NARRATORS UNK (ECHO CONTINUUM) RECORDING 9:

“My earliest memory is of the Scripps-henge—sunset at the end of the pier and Dad carrying me through the pylons into the bloody eye of Jupiter. We lived in San Diego for a year. I remember the devil sun. San Diego is the land of fabulous tanned tits. A shame my travels haven’t taken me back now that I’m old enough to do something about them…”

“Who needs the revelation of cosmic horror? I just saw a video of people on a Canadian highway reaching out the windows of their cars to feed grizzly bears…”

“A nightmare taught me to smudge out my features. Mom, Dad, big sis, and baby bro surrounded me as I lay helpless in the hospital bed. One by one, starting with Dad, they rubbed their faces into voids. When I woke, choking back a scream, it was because I’d erased my own mouth. It’s weird, it’s frightful and like my old pulp hero, The Shadow, it’s a trick of hypnotic suggestion, the power to cloud the minds of men. The alternative is worse.

The blurry geography of our limited perceptions creates a comforting illusion of finite space…”

“I have hunted and slaughtered seventy-four people (twenty-two men, fifty women, and two unknown). Many of these are attributed to animal attacks. This is technically correct. The yellow-eyed wolf, the eighteen-foot tiger shark, the razorback… their victims heard them whisper, heard them laugh, at the savage end. I am about to be taken down by a bumbling private detective with powdered sugar on his tie. Oaf or not, he’s got a set of pistols (pearl-handled six shooters for the love of Christ) and the drop. Silver lining? This is the breakout moment. I’ll go international. It is so exciting…”

END RECORDING

Chapter 7 (Creely & Manson Together)

Creely punched the blonde in the jaw. The kind of shot he’d perfected ages before the Romans or Greeks made it an art; the kind of blow that would reliably put a three-hundred-pound defensive tackle to sleep. When she smirked he panicked, crossed with a right and kicked backward and put furniture between them. Blood oozed from the hole she’d torn in his neck. He tried not to think of the dozens of deaths he’d met at the hands of enemy tribesmen.

They stood, both nude, he dripping red, she rubbing her chin, and regarded one another.

She yawned and took a step forward and stretched her arms in a distracting manner. “I’m waiting for your loyal manservant to burst in with a sawed-off. Spoil my fun.”

“Any second now. Jeeves is a crack shot.”

“Do tell.”

“I’d advise jumping out the window.”

“Get while the getting is good, is what you mean?”

“That’s my sincere advice.”

“Not a chance. You’re less boring than most of the rich scumbags I’ve balled. Think I’ll stick around and see where the evening goes.”

“Thanks. I took classes, practiced in front of a mirror, et cetera.” He’d clamped his hand against the wound to staunch the bleeding. He risked taking it away. The blood had begun to coagulate. His body regenerated swiftly, always had, especially when his adrenaline started cooking. “This might be a trifle indelicate. Your name escapes me.”

“Seriously, dude? After ruining your pool table with our… You can’t even remember my name?”

“Sorry. It was *really* special.”

“Manson. T.J. Manson. Bet you don’t forget again.”

“No wager.” Creely slid his left foot back and to the left. Unfortunately, despite his bravado to the contrary, the servants had gone home after cleanup duties. That meant he might be fucked in more ways than the obvious. Weapons hung as museum ornaments—spears, sabers, knives, and rifles behind glass, revolvers tucked inside cabinets. The problem lay in getting his hands on one. If he could only make a run for his closet, the tables would turn with a vengeance. She looked fast. Fast and deadly and opportunistic. The second he turned to flee, she’d pounce; a move he’d executed on hapless prey on innumerable occasions.

Manson said, “Gotta say—that massacre at the house party last year? Uncool. I figured you were smarter. You stay on a program. Usually it’s the isolated bitch running through the woods, or a juicy hitchhiker, or a vagrant nobody will miss. A houseful of dumb middleclass broads? You must lead a charmed life.”

“I have deep pockets, which enhances my appeal,” he said.

“Getting cocky in your dotage.”

“Bored.”

“Didn’t you recognize your great love? Or is that why you made hash of Jane and her friends?”

Creely longed to rend, to maim. Images shuttered through his mind—he saw himself in tall grass, pursuing deer and antelopes and men. He

composed himself, took a breath, and affected a reasonable demeanor. “For the record, Jane isn’t my great love.”

“Then why slaughter the poor lady?”

“I slaughter lots of people.”

“This feels personal. History?”

“Yes.”

“Or should I ask Renzo the Magnificent?”

“Sure, ask Renzo. Or Don Juan, or Faust. Ask Mephistopheles.”

“I’d love it if one of you would level.”

“Whatever her psychological condition, Jane, as you refer to her, shares my predilections. You’d know. I’ve got your scent. Different. Strange. You’re *her*. Her twin, her clone without…”

“Without her predilections?”

“I intended to say potential. How can this be?”

“We contain multitudes.”

“Jane is worse. She’s the real threat. She’s the one you should be trying to kill.”

“I’m not here to kill you.”

“Glad to hear it, sweetheart. I *will* kill you.”

He grabbed a wingback chair and drove its legs at her midsection. She caught the chair and they contended for several moments, then she ripped it from his grasp and flung it across the room and moved in, fingers crooked and digging for his eyes. He kicked her in the thigh and a welt bloomed. She pressed and he feinted a jab to her nose and kicked her in the leg again. She smiled and slapped the next jab aside and blocked the follow-up kick with the point of her elbow against his shin. The shock and pain of fractured bone fogged his brain. He couldn’t put much weight on his left leg, so he lifted another chair and swung it and when she raised her hands to pluck it from the air, he let go and bolted through the door.

“Goddamn it, come back here,” Manson said.

Creely made it halfway along the corridor to the grand staircase. His leg buckled and he sprawled beneath the impassive gaze of the stuffed and mounted head of a bison he'd bagged on a domestic safari. Manson drove a knee into his spine and chopped the edge of her hand across his neck.

He awakened inside a holographic dream of Wyoming, 1997.

The sky lay flat and close. Sun and moon and faint stars hung in balance.

Wind shivered the pale grass of the plains and drumlin slopes. He crouched so that blades tickled his mouth and concealed him from the bison herd as it grazed. The end of the Twentieth Century or the end of the Paleolithic, there was no visible distinction in this place.

Creely gripped a spear with an obsidian head. His companions reposed at the lodge, drinking, gambling, fat with a rich meal and pride at their accomplishments, their sniper accuracy. Creely had come to these hills with the hunters because they were wealthy and influential. Two managed satellite companies that belonged to the Creely franchise; two others were elite investors; another held congressional office in New York State.

Manson rose from the grass, close enough to kiss. Gleaming and bruised from their battle. She carried a metal cylinder in her left hand. The cylinder drifted from gray to blue to pink as sunrays played over its surface.

"Your eyes change color too. Right now they are yellow. I see the elk and the wolf in you. The saber-toothed cat. The Neanderthal and Australopithecus. If I stared deep enough, maybe I'd see the serpent flick its tongue." The wind did not ruffle her hair. Her body flickered like a badly edited film image on a screen; an actress superimposed on an army of stunt doubles. The fluctuations were rapid—a centimeter too tall, then too short; hair parted differently; a softening of the jaw; a darkening of the eye; scars expanding and retreating like a time-lapse of rivers and tributaries in motion.

He inhaled, seeking some fingernail hold on the situation.

She said, "You have flawless genetic memory. You live, you die, you reincarnate and the pattern of your soul corrupts the newborn host and overwrites its developing personality with memories of a creature that has

existed for eons. Qualifies you as an immortal, huh? Sweet deal. By the time you reach sexual maturity in the fresh body, you possess the wisdom and experience of the ages. Somewhere along the line two bad things happened—you learned to shapeshift into animals. Then you went rabid."

"Don't make it sound so negative." He stepped back. The bison herd took heed and lumbered toward the hills. "There were many of us, once. An old hominid taught me to make tools and wear the skins of animals, and how to think like one. Not a hell of a stretch that early in our evolution. And not much of a step from empathizing with beasts to transfiguring into beasts. The code resides in everyone."

"Yet you require a talisman."

"Yes, or a fetish. A tooth, a pelt, a scale. My own will, my own immunity to superstition, is insufficient to overcome the need for a psychological crutch. Damned frustrating."

"You're lucky. The moon doesn't control your biology. You aren't under a curse."

"More of a curse than you might believe," he said. "As to curses… You're with the government."

"No. I represent Limbus at the moment."

"I'm unfamiliar with them. Cloak and dagger, tentacles in every pie, does that fit?"

"Good enough. Jane was an asset, once upon a time. They wiped her memory, implanted a post-hypnotic suggestion or two, and set her in your path. They've run variations of the operation on an infinite loop."

"Why would this Limbus organization set her in my path?"

Manson raised an eyebrow. "Come on, Creely. This isn't quantum physics."

"Matter, antimatter. Limbus theorizes we might react in proximity. She's asleep and they want me to awaken her."

"You're her baby, so to speak. You and your proto-human genes. It'll work with the right version, the true version."

Why the hell would your masters do this?"

"They wish nature to take its course."

“It did. Red of tooth and claw.”

“Mother Nature is keen on redundancies. We’ve a spare.”

“I don’t want to be the way I am.” He stabbed his spear into the earth and watched the retreating bison. “I had a love. Several loves. Children. Brothers and sisters. Comrades. Foes. Their ghosts dwell here, always.” He tapped his temple. “Eternity is… You haven’t the capacity to grasp eternity. It warps your mind.”

“Ask me if I care. You’re a predator. Me too. Professional courtesy, yeah. Sympathy? Fuck off.”

Creely wiped the tear from his cheek. “Then what do you care about?”

“The extinction of sapient beings.” Manson raised the cylinder. “This was found in a cave three hundred years from today. Analysis says someone left it there during the late Hellenic. We’re guessing an extraterrestrial intelligence. One or two of them have humanity’s best interests at heart.”

“What’s inside?”

“Chamber music, laugh tracks, football scores, your vital statistics and Jane’s. A death ray, a ruby ray. The record of everything.”

“Lying around in a cave three centuries from today. Which means, it’s in that cave as we speak. Waiting for you to dig up. Time travel paradoxes are fun. Where’s the cave?”

“Doesn’t matter *where* because everywhere is kinda the same. Reality isn’t a line, it’s a blizzard of glass shards whirling at tachyon velocity through a void. Problem is, the void narrows to a bottleneck. Those fragments merge, Creely. I’ve seen the end point. Annihilation.”

“Must be a relief to have an endgame. To *see* an end. I can’t even suicide out—reincarnation is a bitch.”

“Yeah, about that… The cycles are longer, yeah? Barring violent death, middle-age drags on and on for you.”

Creely freed the spear. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Limbus noticed. Your aging process has arrested. What would happen if you actually became an immortal, full stop? Say you inhabited a single body for millennia? No soft reset, no interruption in the power curve?”

“I’d go comatose from boredom.”

“Your humanity, whatever shred you possess, would erode until only the monstrous or the alien held sway. The statistics demonstrate your appetite for blood has increased, that at some point it will be exponential.”

“Sounds… ominous.” Possibilities infiltrated his bland resolve.

“Here’s the kicker. What if you learned to wear the shape of alien predators? You’re already near the terrestrial apex. We can’t have any of it, Creely. Not here, not in any continuum. Killing you isn’t the best solution since you’ll simply reconstitute and begin the cycle again, warier and smarter. There’s one option. We’ll feed you to something that will hold your squirming flesh in its stomach acid for a thousand years. Then your future self will receive the same treatment.”

“Are you mad enough to gamble on controlling her? She’s the beginning and the end. She’ll eat the world alive.”

“And shit it back out. In twenty millennia, or twenty thousand, whoever comes along next will have a chance to do a better job than we did. And at least they’ll look like us. The choice between an occasionally destructive deity who wants to be left alone in slumber versus a god who might assume the form of an alien monster and divide humanity into hunting preserves is pretty clear.”

He tucked the haft of the spear under his armpit and oriented the tip toward her navel. He scrunched his features and subtly rounded his spine. His ankle turned and bent. He said in a soft accent, “Come now, miss. You wouldn’t hit a guy with a clubfoot?” The spearhead was already traveling.

Manson didn’t flinch as Stone Age obsidian pierced her stomach and kept going. “While we were having this fascinating conversation, an extraction team has entered your home and made preparations to whisk you away on an all-expenses-paid trip to hell. Thanks for a lovely evening.”

She snapped her fingers. The cylinder incandesced and its flash buried the sun under a tidal wave of blackness.

Epilogue: Doomsday Variations

KRAKATOA (ALPHA CONTINUUM) RECORDING 8:

I almost don't recognize Jane. The true Jane, whom I had escaped once not long before the end of the world as we knew it. I'd thought myself clever, as a wolf who slips a snare or outruns a hunter often does.

She materializes from the blurry background and strides toward me dressed in rags of a long bygone era. She isn't covered in blood, her belly isn't round to bursting, but the scouts aren't returning; not in this life. Her expression is beautiful and dreadful as the goddess our ancestors carved into stone by torchlight. She's awake again. She begins to change and not in the trivial manner that I warp flesh and bones to mimic the wild beasts. Her transformation is primordial.

Burton and the rest waste their last seconds on this miserable chunk of rock by opening fire with antipersonnel guns and rockets. I run. This old man can pick them up and put them down faster than any other man alive.

I tear free of my suit as I sprint toward the beach. It's the wrong way to go. Alas, under these circumstances, there's only bad and worse. I'm mildly surprised she doesn't catch me until I hear a gabble of confused voices over the hand radio, then cries of terror, and silence. Clad in skivvies and a necklace of hawk talons, I leap from a cliff and sail high above the ocean. From this vantage I discern the dark bulk of the Krakatoa sinking into the depths. The submarine is perpendicular and trailing white froth as oxygen boils from a sundered hull. The hull groans as it is crushed within the threshing coils of a leviathan.

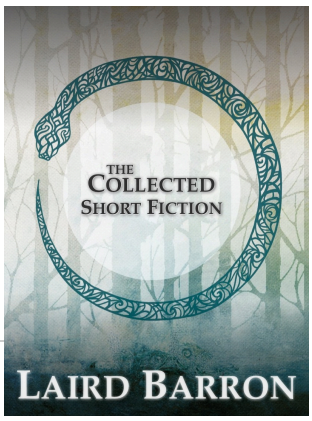
The atmosphere is impossible to breathe for long. I'm already laboring when a bullet from the direction of shore knocks me from the sky. Manson, of course, sealing the deal. She's not the kind to leave this to chance.

Jane waits, gauging the trajectory of my body as it reverts to that of a man mid-air. She stretches five miles long. Her sinuous girth reflects a rainbow pattern where the sun illuminates its scales. Her scales cannot be burnt or pierced by any weapon. The poison in her fangs is deadly enough to annihilate the entire population of Earth at its peak. She's older than everything except the muck at the bottom of the sea; her guts roil with a special acid that preserves living prey in indefinite agony. She is my opposite, or I am hers. She feeds and sleeps. She possesses not an inkling of mortal cruelty, although her capacity for vengeance is significant.

I fall to a hellish fate. I'm not even a bite-sized morsel in the scheme of her appetite. Hardly worth the effort to part those titanic jaws. She takes it, though…

END RECORDING

Tomahawk Park Survivors Raffle



This version taken from *Swift to Chase*, 2016
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1. Anchorage, Alaska. Autumn, 1979. (I'm going to kill you all):

Lucius's orgasm transcended earthquakes and other localized apocalypses—a blue sun on the far side of the universe intoned, HEADS WILL ROLL! The blue sun went supernova and immolated a good chunk of a galaxy and the top of her skull. She gave her legs a minute to quit shaking and went hunting for her clothes.

Her lover, young hapless Esteban, lay spread-eagle across the mattress like he'd gotten flattened by a truck. He didn't even bitch that Lucius was screwing and booking. He groaned and covered his eyes with his left arm.

"Ribbon of Darkness," unspooled mournful and timeless over the cheap AM radio. The Magnificent Seven assembled for a class photo on the wall above a bureau even more hard-bitten than them or the Wild Bunch. Lucius pulled on her stockings, dress, then the knee high go-go boots and leather jacket with Black Flag's four-bar flag hand-stitched between the shoulders. Lucius loved the bad boys as Panic and now they were even better.

She lit a cigarette (*Player No. 6,* no substitutes) and checked her watch. The watch was a high school sophomore graduation present to herself swiped from a tourist-trap gift shop during a summer trip to Washington State a couple years back. A *real* watch with a quartz face, stainless steel butt plate (*water-resistant to 50 meters!*), and a band of interlocking metal links you could wrap around a snow tire. Not the prissy filament-thin chain some girls wore on their delicate widdle wrists. The kind of timepiece construction foremen and steely-nerved execs strapped on the way gladiators did it up with iron bracers and spiked cestuses. Backhand a fool

in the chops with this baby and he or she would go down, minus teeth. The glass already had a chip. She couldn't remember how it happened.

Save your life one day, Dad said when he examined the watch. Dad: King of foreshadowing. His wedding ring had kept his finger attached after a piebald stallion chomped it in his horse-breaking days of yore. Keen on serendipity and Jim Beam, was Dad.

Gods help her if she needed more saving in this short life. She'd almost bought the farm during that WA State vacation. The disaster at Tomahawk Park killed how many kids? Seven? Nine? An explosion? A collapsed structure? Poison gas? It slipped her mind now as the psychic wounds healed. The school counselor had spoken of survivor's guilt and compartmentalization. Have some pills of forgetting, the woman said. Move on, kid.

Lucius finished the cigarette. She slid on five rings—three costume gemstones on her right hand; a mood ring and a silver death's head on the left. She scooped her clutch (black vinyl with a small bronze clasp of a bald eagle descending, talons out) and strode through the doorway without saying goodbye. *I don't say goodbye, ever,* she'd told Esteban when they first knocked boots (which occurred during that fateful trip to Tomahawk Park). *Especially to you.*

She stashed a switchblade in her purse alongside the compact and black cherry lipstick. The switchblade recently belonged to a gangster wannabe, ass-slapping hick, of which all too many bred in fetid Alaskan backwaters. The hick didn't come around town much since prom. The gemstone dents and death's head tattoos on his greasy face were possibly permanent.

"Hi, Mrs. Mace," she said to Esteban's mom as they passed on the stairs.

"Hello, dear." The older woman wore a kimono with a red heron stitched on the breast. Her hair was bound in green curlers at half past ten PM. "I miss anything?"

"Not a damned thing."

"His father's son. How's your mother?"

"A-Okay, ma'am." Lucius didn't speak to her parents anymore. They didn't appear to notice.

Meanwhile:

Finally dark enough.

Butch Tooms slumped low in the backseat of the stolen Pontiac. Nobody ever looks in the backseat until it's too late. He wore his mother's thigh-high silk stocking over his face. He twisted its mate into a garrote. Motown drained the car battery. *Friday Night Countdown*.

Across the way, Lucius Lochinvar exited the Mace house and walked into the gloom toward Northern Lights Boulevard. She tromped along, mouth set, stern as hell, arms swinging like she was on her weekend job as roller derby enforcer Scara Fawcett at the *Hippodrome North*. Tough little broad. He evaluated her the way a cobra assesses a mongoose. Kill now, kill later, or avoid entirely? He decided to kill her next week at the party. Easier to keep the bodies in one pile, right?

Those undulating hips stirred his ambition. If the death gods were with him he'd get his freak on, too. *After* he'd let the air out of her tires, for safety's sake.

The Jackson 5 came on the radio to agree. *XYZ, baby! OneTwoThree, baby!*

Somewhere, Sometime (WA State, many years after the events of '77 &'79):

It was a fifteen-minute drive from Odd Fellows cemetery into the foothills on the fringe of Capitol National Park. Fifteen minutes with the pedal to the floor and no traffic.

Dr. Erika Bakker Shunn beat Jimmy Flank to his cabin by a nose. He wished he could say the visit was a surprise, except it was far too late for that. Self-delusion was out of his market. Self-preservation looked shaky too.

After a third go-round with the grieving widow, Jimmy was an enervated wreck, ready to cry uncle, to call it a day. Thank everything unholy, now the formalities were complete, Mrs. Shunn was briskly business.

"So, you'll help me." Her tone suggested she expected Jimmy to kill someone. The arch-conspirator's whisper. Her nails drew Aztec dimples on

his graying chest. He felt relief that since her husband was dead, whatever she wanted couldn't be *that* bad. Right?

She'd brought him a list of names on a dirty piece of memo paper. Five of them were familiar to varying degrees—*Toshi Ryoko, Howard Campbell, Louis Plimpton, Lucius Mace, and Harrison J.* Ryoko and Campbell were famous zoologists; Louis Plimpton was another dead rich scientist who treated his profession like the world's most vital hobby—he'd been a rival of Linwood's in the bug field. Plimpton smoked himself in 1980. Lucius Mace (formerly Lochinvar) dated his best friend in high school. Lucius popped out three kids and ran for the hills, abandoning them and her husband. Last, but not least, Jimmy had also known Harrison J during their teen years in Alaska. Weird kid. Nobody called him Harrison or Harry; ever Smiling J. Worked for NASA in some deep earth research site studying cosmic rays.

Why were these names collected by an antisocial scientist whose best friend was a jar of formaldehyde? *If I help her it won't be from guilt. I won't do it because I owed Linwood a damned thing.* Linwood Shunn, being a rich kid from Olympia, of course he married a rich girl from the hometown. Dr. Erika Bakker-Shunn, psychiatrist of renown, her claim to fame owed to the fact she'd had three quarters of the Hollywood A-list on her couch—one way or another. A sly one, the missus. An Amherst product (Ph.D. in clinical psychiatry) with the fangs to match.

"You brought the tapes?" Sweat burned his eyes. *You bet she did.* No chance she'd risk holding his interest for the trip to town, the ubiquitous distractions of his trade. She'd have brought the hook with her. Her kind didn't miss a trick.

"Oh, yes! They're in the car." That was all she needed. She gilded her decaying splendor in Jimmy's robe and flounced from the cabin. The door banged in her wake, let in a chilly draft. Marty Robbins was crooning about devil women on the transistor radio and that was damned apropos.

A filthy canvas sea bag leaned in the corner, opposite the sliding glass door of the shoebox terrace. Woods and more woods out there. The cabin was otherwise barren except for a toothbrush and an electric razor in the bathroom, some food items in the cupboards. Dirty dishes, bottles. Mice.

Jimmy blinked at watermarks in the rafters. “Goddamn it, Linwood. Why’d you do this to me?” He wanted a cigarette, a drink, preferably in the tropics. The cabin was an icebox. He pulled the army blanket to his neck and groaned.

Linwood Shunn’s mortal remains lined the bottom of a ceramic urn in the trunk of his loving wife’s ’69 Mustang. Dead, but not out of the picture. Not out of Jimmy’s hair from the size of it. As a part-time private eye, a man met his share of cranks and eccentrics. Linwood Shunn had taken the cake, a first class head-job with a trophy case full of degrees and a ritzy pedigree he seldom admitted because it embarrassed him to no end. He’d also been, as recently as last week, one of North America’s preeminent entomologists, whatever use that was in the grand scheme.

In Jimmy’s opinion, entomologist was a creepy vocation. Why would a man born to old money waste so much precious time pulling wings off flies? The Bug Man, is what everyone called the late Dr. Shunn. Cockroach Lover. A radical professor with Evergreen College, until they axed him for eccentric behavior, alcoholism, and derogatory comments regarding the dean. Eccentric kook or not, his work ethic and ambition put the rest of the faculty to shame. Nothing short of the eventual coronary conclusion could’ve derailed Shunn’s gusto for research—a dozen companies courted his services. As a trust fund hippie, money was never a real consideration. He always had an iron in the fire, always came up roses.

Jimmy and the doctor first met when Linwood was looking for a rough and tumble character to perpetrate some deeds on the shady side of the law. He hired Jimmy to follow his sweet, younger wife around, see if she was cheating on him—it was damned hard to track her movements, what with her Beverly Hills practice and their homes in Mexico, California, Long Island, and Tumwater.

Had she cheated on her crazy, dry as bones, ant-loving husband? Dumb question—Erika had been taking ski lessons in July, for God’s sake, buzzing about the strapping person of a super Swedish beefcake, an ex-Olympic slalom champion named Hans Zwick. Hans had the goods—blond as a Norse god, steely-eyed and a codpiece to rival a blue-ribbon zucchini. *Hell, doc, I’d bang him myself if I had a shot!*

Jimmy and his trusty roll of incriminating film—pictures that captured Hans glorying in the company of a brutal-looking transvestite on Seattle's Aurora Avenue—convinced Hans to fly home early lest he lose his corporate sponsorship from a chopstick manufacturer. All was well with the world once more. The Shunn marriage skidded a bit, but didn't quite crash through the guardrail. At least she hadn't seemed to take it personally. Not that a man could ever be certain what was going on upstairs with a woman like Erika Shunn. Linwood's reaction proved more alarming because Jimmy earned himself a friend for life—for better or worse. The good professor called him two or three times a week, begged to ride along on stakeouts, and showed up in biker bars tossing around Jimmy's name. He behaved as if the detective's cachet at the Brotherhood Tavern was equal to a country club membership.

Erika returned with a cardboard box. She shoved a mass of Jimmy's papers and empty beer cans aside to make a home on the table for her exhibit. "Jesus, it's freezing in here! Can't you get the heat going?"

"Propane's out. My truck has a great heater, if you want to sit in there a spell."

"You're kidding."

"Keys are in my pants. Have a ball."

She gave him a look and began rummaging; unpacked an antiquated tape recorder approximately the size of a car battery, and a stack of number ten envelopes. The envelopes were slathered with Linwood's cryptic handwriting. They bulged with cassettes, photographs, and press clippings. She quickly segregated the envelopes into jagged piles.

"He gave me this stuff a couple months ago. Tried to be casual about it an' all—but, hell, not many people were more obvious than poor Linwood. He knew this was coming."

"Told me the bum ticker ran in the family."

"No—that's—" She grimaced and resumed sorting with a kind of manic intensity. "I don't think it's that simple."

"No?" He needed a drink, all right.

Her eyes gleamed perilously. “Linwood wasn’t too organized. This is kind of a bitch.”

“Sorry.” Jimmy shrugged on a shirt and glanced around for his pants. Pants on, feet turning alabaster against the grimy floorboards, he found his least filthy glass amongst its brethren in the wasteland kitchenette, dumped in a lethal dose of vodka and muttered, “Cheers.”

“God. He wanted me to keep this crap under my bed. After he left, I put it in my fire safe. But I didn’t think… I had no idea at the time. He told me if anything ever happened to him, anything suspicious, I was to hand everything over to you, that you’d figure it out and do whatever needed to be done. Linwood was such an eccentric I never thought it really meant anything.” She spilled a batch of cassettes. She closed her eyes and hummed a faint, disjointed tune.

Jimmy pressed a fresh drink into her hand. He collected the fallen articles while she downed the liquor and swayed in place. “What’s on the tapes?” he said, to make conversation. Her closed eyes and dreamy expression were getting to him.

“Um, bugs. Bug noises. Put one in—try the, not that one, the other one. Yeah. Wait, don’t play it yet. Gimme a minute to collect myself.”

“Bugs,” he said. “Shocker there. I thought maybe some rambling about government plots, an extortion racket. A confession to embezzling from the Evergreen College marijuana party fund. Good stuff.”

“Listen to me, Jimmy. People are watching my house. A couple suits followed me around one day.” Erika looked at him and held out her glass until he filled it again. “Maybe cops. Maybe Feds. Maybe some kind of Nobel Mafia. They’re spooky, whoever they are.”

Jimmy parted the drapes over the sink, checked the environs. Shadows crept from the undeveloped wilderness beyond the rude cul-de-sac. There was the Mustang and his modest Toyota pickup. The lake lurked somewhere farther on. “When was this?”

“Uh—last week. The day after Linwood dropped dead.”

“The FBI agents, or whomever. Did you get their names or see badges?”

“No. Cold-blooded is what they were. Black suits, black hats, sunglasses. Stood around like they had curtain rods up the ass. I felt compelled to speak to them. It was weird.”

He clicked on a reading lamp, began peering at the newspaper clippings and photos. Mostly stories about scientific conferences, ant swarms, and planet-killing comets. “So… what was the conversational gambit?”

She sipped her drink and winced as the vodka hit bottom. “The suits wanted to know the last time I’d seen Lucius Lochinvar or Harrison J. I’m unaware who the hell Lochinvar or J are supposed to be. Friends of Linwood? Enemies? We’ve got terrorists blowing apart skyscrapers and they’re investigating my husband for suspicion of… I dunno quite what. Okay, ready?” She laughed shrilly and forced down the *play* button on the recorder.

After about fifteen seconds of listening to bug noises, Jimmy said, “What in the hell am I hearing?”

“Beetles. A whole bunch of beetles. Linwood told me insects are acting strange—ant supercolonies, bee die-offs… said it has something to do with a solar alignment affecting electromagnetic fields. Planet X…”

“I don’t like that. At all.” He disliked it because it didn’t sound like cicadas. Hissing, warbling, and alien trilling mixed with female screams. The orchestra pit at the Devil’s concert. Jimmy’s teeth were on edge. A memory partially surfaced. Waterslides, a bonfire, shadows cavorting beneath the stars, and those screams… He blinked rapidly and glimpsed a man in a black hat and blacker shades, and another man, younger and heavier, covered in blood. *Whatever happened to Butch Tooms, anyway? I haven’t thought of that bastard since 1979…*

“Creepy, huh? They’re harmless, though.”

“Sure they are.” He cut the tape in mid screech. “I’ve got a headache and that shit isn’t helping.”

“Well?”

“I dunno. If the government is involved I don’t think I want to be. No offense. Hell, Linwood’s gone. My opinion? Cover your ass; be a patriot—hand this stuff over. It’s no use to you.”

“It’s not your opinion I’m buying, Jimmy.”

“Well, it’s the only offer on the table.”

“All I’m asking—”

“I know what you’re asking.”

“And it isn’t really about me, sweetie. He wanted it to be you. I dunno why. Silly bastard worshipped you, called you the real deal. A man’s man.”

“Yeah? Well, he didn’t know much.”

“What—too much trouble for you to nose around and ask a few questions? I can understand, really. It must be difficult to tear yourself away from your little palace.” Her cheeks were flushed. She stared at him for a long moment, mouth set at a hard angle. “I can provide an incentive.”

“I’m retired.” Half true. His license recently lapsed and he hadn’t taken a job in nine months. He was also forty-two years old. Practically good enough for senior citizen rates at the movies.

Erika nodded and retrieved a checkbook from her leather purse. She filled in an immodest sum, signed it with a spiky flourish. “C’mon, Jimmy. Talk to Linwood’s colleagues.”

Jimmy tried not to stare at the check, its obscene number, but it grabbed him by the face and refused to let go. *What were you up to, Linwood, old chap? Were you always more than what you seemed?* The possibility gained weight even as he turned it over in his mind. “I knew J—we called him Smiling J.”

“It truly is a small world. Linwood probably took that into consideration. Why else would he want me to hire you?”

“You haven’t hired me…”

Five days later, Jimmy lay in a shallow grave in the hills north of Olympia. He stared sightlessly as Smiling J shoveled dirt over his face. The evening sun pulsed crimson and cold and blue around the edges.

Smiling J said, “You had two chances, Jim. None of us gets a third.”

2. Rally, Washington. Spring, 1977. (Planet X)

Nineteen youth players for the Chugiak Wolverines Roller Derby and the Timberwolf Hockey teams (mostly incoming Onager High juniors and a handful of outgoing seniors who weren't invited on the graduate trip to D.C.) flew from Anchorage to Spokane, Washington courtesy of Butch Tooms, whose father bankrolled both clubs. They hopped a bus to Rally, Outpost of the Atomic Frontier! Rally was a twenty-minute commute to the fence line of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation on the Columbia River. They'd refined the plutonium for Fat Man and Little Boy on the reservation. Fancy as that might be, the real attraction for this crowd of young tourists lay a few miles upriver in neighboring Tomahawk, home of Tomahawk Park; by its own admission, the most dangerous waterpark and motor entertainment arena in North America. Merchants sold ball caps and tee shirts that read, TOMAHAWK PARK SURVIVOR! in bloody letters. The shirts came in green, white, and black.

The kids doubled up in rooms at the Rocket Inn. Mr. Hyjak, Mr. Three Trees, and Mrs. Buntline had drawn the short straws when it came time to sacrifice parents as chaperones. Upon arrival, the trio immediately repaired to the lounge and told the kids not to bother them unless a nuclear reactor went China Syndrome.

Esteban Mace and Jimmy Flank sat on a retaining wall in front of the motel. A juniper hedge dug into their backs. Mosquitoes were biting hard, which made the Alaskans feel right at home. Most of the gang milled self-consciously in the middle of the courtyard, either heckling or studiously ignoring one another depending on the factions involved.

Rich boy (moderately well-off, at any rate) Butch Tooms, tall and sleek and softly athletic in a charcoal turtleneck, leaned against the trunk of Mr. Hyjak's rented sedan and flirted with Threnody Rudnick, Molly Vile, and Sarah Peters. Threnody favored a midriff tee (Chewbacca from the epic new flick, *Star Wars*), short-shorts, and roller-skates. She hadn't made the derby team and her getup raised eyebrows among the other girls. Tooms obviously liked it, though. He had the come-hither lean and not-so subtle pelvic thrust combo going. His henchman, Smiling J, lurked nearby. Smiling J dressed like he'd stumbled away from a marathon shift in a NASA control room—thick glasses, rumpled white shirt and dark tie, corduroy slacks, and scuffed dress shoes. He seldom smiled, of course, and his servitude to Butch Tooms

mystified those who'd grappled with the muscularity of his intellect on the debate team or chess club. "Weird dude" was the consensus.

"Cheesy bastard." Esteban spat between his sneakers. He played backup center on the hockey team. A lean, wiry boy who knew how to duck the worst shots. Papa Mace had taught him that much. You can slip your old man's drunken haymakers, you can handle pimple-faced goons in pads all the livelong day.

"Who?" Jimmy concentrated on rolling a bomber. Jimmy wrestled at 152 for Onager High. He showed up to skate for the Timberwolves Hockey Club whenever he pleased. The coaches hated the arrangement, but he paid his fee and it was hard to deny a left forward who led with his helmet.

"BT. Clown prince and heir-apparent of the Tooms Estate."

"Butch paid for everything, man. My traveling expenses now amount to beer and ganja. I like that about him." Jimmy lit the joint and dragged hard.

"*Daddy* paid for everything." It sounded harsher than Esteban intended. He had radiation sickness from mooning over Lucius Lochinvar and twiddling his thumbs wasn't doing much to smooth the edges. *You hate Butch because he's smooth and blond and the girls love his sense of humor. He dropped out of school his junior year and he'll always have more money than you and get farther. Maybe get farther with Lucius…*

"Relax. Lochinvar doesn't give him the time of day."

"Did I say that out loud?"

"No, man. Your face kinda scrunches when you got angst. Your angst is attached to your blue balls. You're also staring death rays at our patron over there innocently chatting up the hoochies. He's going to be a senator; you're going to be a Marine. It rubs ya raw."

"I'm all right with joining the Corps."

"You ain't all right. You need to chill. Chicks dig chill. Tooms is chill as a goddamned winter's day." Jimmy waved the joint under Esteban's nose. "Take it. Have a hit off the northern lights, my brother."

"Twist my arm, will ya?" Esteban accepted the joint, inhaled and felt a small fire begin in his chest. Easier that way when it came to dealing with his friend. He and Jimmy hunted ptarmigan in Hatcher Pass and caribou in

Copper River Valley with Keith Norse and Bruce Three-Trees. Bruce's dad or Keith's uncle usually drove them and stayed at camp and drank while the boys hiked into the hills. Keith was one of six black kids at Onager, including senior fullback heartthrob Clyde Zant. Bruce was Aleut. He and Sarah Peters (Athabascan; her extended family lived in Ruby on the mighty Yukon) endured an inordinate amount of crap for being the only natives at a school of eighteen hundred students.

When they first met in junior high, Bruce and Keith razzed Esteban about being the whitest Mexican in Alaska. *We're Scotch Irish*, he'd explained about a hundred times. Keith said "Scotch Irish" didn't exist. Nobody, including Esteban, could figure out why his Mom and Dad had chosen his name, except that maybe it had something to do with Mom's crush on Ricardo Montelban. Jimmy said, *Yo, mystery solved. Who don't wanna ball Montelban?* Jimmy's sister, Lynne, said, *Like totally!* Afterward, Esteban's closest friends called him Ricardo as often as not.

Raised voices snapped his attention around. Jackie Brock and Lucius Lochinvar were in the middle of a shoving match. Jackie Brock's mascara streamed rivulets and rendered her a particularly ineffective Boadicea. Quick JB background: She dressed in all black and droned Fleetwood Mac non-fucking stop on her portable eight track player. As if that wasn't enough, she declared herself a witch—actually she claimed to be a Wiccan. *Witch* stuck.

"Uh, oh," Jimmy said. "Catfight at nine o' clock. Your girlfriend's got her rings on. Here comes the dentist."

Jackie made the fatal mistake of socking Lucius in the eye. There wasn't any mustard on it; Jackie preferred clawing and hair-pulling and she tucked her thumb under. Esteban leaped into action as Lucius grinned and got a fistful of Jackie's brand new do and reared back to deliver the hammer of the gods with a Coke bottle. He caught Lucius from behind in a bear hug and spun her 180. Under the Blue Oyster Cult T-shirt, her body rippled with animal muscle, suppressed for the moment, thankfully. Lucius could've rearranged his nose or smashed in his teeth. She'd gotten to be hell on wheels for the derby team (so, so many punch-ups) and had developed a lethal right cross to go with her forearm shiver. Plus, the rings, those bone crunching rings.

She allowed him to set her down. “My tits got magnets, or what?”

He realized where his hands lingered and jumped back as if he’d touched a hotplate. “Oh, shit. Sorry.”

Jimmy said, “Where’s your badge? Cause you were coppin’ a feel, son.”

Meanwhile, Lucius’ older brother Pierce and his pal Jeff Vellum gently took custody of hysterical Jackie and led her away. Same old scene, a little less bloodletting than usual. So far, Lucius had thrashed everybody in the Brock household except for Mr. and Mrs. Brock.

“You got some color there.” Lucius brushed her knuckle, softly-roughly, against Esteban’s cheek. “Virgin.”

“Naw, that’s frostbite,” he said. “My cheeks are always kinda rosy.”

“This is more like the hood of a fire truck.”

“Jesus H Christian.” Cassidy Sloan strolled over and whacked Lucius on the arm. “You can’t kill Jackie yet. We had a deal. No sacrifices before the full moon.”

“When’s the next one?” Lucius said.

“After we get our day at the park.”

“*After* the bonfire party,” Esteban said.

“There’s a bonfire party? It’s been decided?”

“The word has been given.”

Lucius adjusted her left-hand rings. “Fine. I won’t murder her until the party.”

“You’re a pal.” Sloan also skated for the Wolverines derby girls. Her handle was Slugger Sloan. She wore the team shirt and warmup jacket for every occasion. All the boys wanted her, especially the adventuresome jocks. She didn’t have much use for any of them.

Later:

Smiling J paid for drinks at the Fat Boy Lounge. A neon sign over the door blinked:

Proud of the Cloud! Nuke em til they glow!

Eighteen years old as of May, bartenders bounced right off his receding hairline and stern gauntness and poured the booze without a second glance.

The cowboy in the rear booth accepted a scotch and soda. Rally was one of those towns where a man could get away with dressing like a shitkicker or a laboratory tech and be lost in the forest for the trees. Mr. Speck did not belong in Rally. He blended with the laborer set of the local scene in a scuffed Stetson hat, Levi jacket, and plaid shirt. On other occasions in other towns he wore a dyed-in-the-wool G-man black suit and shades. He'd gotten some rays since last Smiling J had seen him.

"Where's Mr. Hyjak?" Mr. Speck said.

"Hanging with the parents. Got to make it look legit."

"Our friend will be ready tomorrow night?"

"Without a doubt. Told me to tell you to be cool."

"It's sad." Mr. Speck didn't appear sad. He sipped his scotch and nodded in bland satisfaction. Doodles covered his napkin and the reverse of his coaster. Equations and mathematical gibberish. Moon skulls baring sharp teeth. A cross-sectioned mastiff revealing circuitry and gears. Guns.

"What is sad?" Smiling J glanced at the door, wary of a classmate or chaperone wandering in. He saw only a crowd of strangers. Eyes and hair gleamed strangely in the reddish, negative glare of panel lamps. A DJ in Kit Carson-era buckskins spun disco and up-tempo jazz.

"None of your friends miss you. The adults in charge don't even realize you've jumped the fence. You have a big brain. Could be Oppenheimer or Sagan and yet…"

"Mr. Hyjak—"

"Considers you a disposable asset. Pot, meet Kettle, let me tell you. It's hard to believe Hyjak is the best the Central Intelligence Apparatus could offer—"

"Agency. Butch realizes. He's a true friend."

"Mr. Tooms does not count. He is evolving beyond human sensibility."

"His *dad* is Mr. Tooms. Butch is plain old Butch."

"Mr. Butch Tooms is less than that. He'll be more, soon. He'll be full."

“What’s so special about Butch? Or me? You could select anyone…”

“Our relationship with the Tooms and J families is longstanding. There are rules. Protocols. Don’t kid yourself, though. Mr. Tooms is merely the first of a horde.”

Smiling J pictured Butch Tooms in their shared motel room, lying on a double bed, arms folded, gaze fixed on the ceiling while Threnody Rudnick and Molly Vile took turns polishing his knob. The girls enjoyed poppers—the expensive, exotic varieties. Butch had a steady connection. Butch could have afforded a suite in a better hotel with real pro call girls, but preferred to chum with hoi polloi.

“You’re not hoi polloi,” Mr. Speck said. “From our perspective you are an important performer in the flea circus. We’ve named you, groomed you, told our friends, made plans for your future.”

“Huh? Am I talking to myself again?” The J men were infamous for externalizing interior monologues.

“Did you enjoy *Star Wars?* The kids are absolutely crazy about it.”

“Meh. Wasn’t bad.” The boy wouldn’t admit he’d sat through eleven showings of the film and memorized half the lines. Princess Leia in virginal white, at odds with her name, inflamed his imagination, so to speak. “The plot is sort of ridiculous—”

“Drink your drink. Put some hair on your chest. You’re off to Caltech this autumn. Pussy doesn’t exactly form a queue for the pocket protector set. Remember—alcohol is the best friend an ugly person will ever have.”

Smiling J didn’t retort despite the heat in his cheeks. During a previous meeting he’d witnessed a display of the man’s capabilities. Terror and exultation were indeed bedfellows. Could he simultaneously love and dread Mr. Speck? His wiser angels said he only loved what Mr. Speck could do for him and feared what Mr. Speck might do *to* him.

“J, consider this—the tasks I perform are not tasks, but choices in service of a cause. I live for the moment, and you should too. Car accident, heart attack, gunshot, alien abduction, extinction event; the end is always nigh.”

Smiling J pushed his glasses up. He waited without speaking because he knew from experience there’d be more.

“Allow me to give you an example. There is a doomsday theory among your physicists.” Mr. Speck touched his scribbled napkin. “Those who speak of it, speak quietly, because it is forbidden. Planet X… Oh, you are familiar with this theory?”

“Uh, I’m not sure whether…”

“I won’t take offense. This is your education.”

“I’ve heard of it. I mean, Planet X isn’t a secret. You said it yourself, though. Nobody thinks there’s a killer planet out there. Fun to noodle around, like UFO theory and crop circles.”

Smiling J’s Uncle Willard worked at a high security installation in Gakona. Since 1970, the military spent a pile of tax dollars building a mystery project in the hills. Uncle Willard refused to speak of his assignment. However, he gave his nephew a telescope and an astronomical catalogue with the covers and title pages snipped.

“You’d be surprised,” Mr. Speck said. “Certain individuals behind the scenes are true believers regarding the existence of Planet X. The worst case scenario is a repeat of what happened in the Yucatan.”

“The Yucatan, sir?”

“Ah, I leap ahead of myself. Short version: Next summer a gravity anomaly map made in the 1960s will fall into the hands of a geophysicist employed by a foreign energy corporation. His research will reveal evidence of a massive crater in the Yucatan obscured by jungle and bodies of water. The Chicxulub Crater’s existence will in turn generate a theory that dinosaurs were wiped from the face of the Earth sixty-six million years ago by the deep impact of a celestial body.”

“Makes sense,” Smiling J said, completely uncertain whether it truly did. “Are you saying Earth is going get smacked by a meteor?”

Mr. Speck nodded and his face tipped into the light, then darkness. “In the relative near future, Planet X, with a mass thirteen times that of Earth, will heave in its long orbit beyond Pluto and disrupt the delicate stream of the Kuiper Belt. The gravity well is immense. Planet X drags a tidal wave of debris in its wake. Imagine this tidal wave of space debris directed toward your solar system.” He traced a line from the edge of the napkin toward its

center and circled back. “Pack an umbrella because it will rain shit down like you’ve never seen.”

“Humankind would go the way of the dino.”

“Should this scenario come to pass, *every* living organism will be made extinct except for cockroaches and bacteria.”

“Oh, man. What we’re doing tomorrow… Jeez, Mr. Speck. If this exercise can help avert Doomsday, then I’m in for sure.”

Mr. Speck leaned back until his features sank into shadow. “Averting global annihilation is hardly the goal of our operation.” He sounded amused. “Planet X might destroy your species this summer or it might wait another twenty-seven million years and pulverize an Earth devoid of sapient creatures. Possibly it will disrupt certain fields and play havoc with human evolution. I have no idea. What I know is this: Tomorrow, you will facilitate a culling of brainless, oversexed youth. One thing has nothing to do with the other.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. I thought the purpose—”

“What we do, we do to satisfy intellectual curiosity and for the fun. It’s important to love what you do, kid.”

Somewhere, Sometime II:

Deep night gathered around the cabin. A candle shone through the window into a lonely gulf that descended past Alpha Centauri and into the outer dark.

He said, “Baby, pumpkin pie, honeybunch, whatever is the matter?”

She sat at the foot of the bed, facing away from him. “Someone else’s dream isn’t the most compelling item. But, good God, last night.”

He clasped his hands behind his head and regarded the exposed beams in the ceiling of the cabin. “Tell me, sugar-booger.”

“Ugh. C’mon.”

“Sorry. Sugar plum. Go ahead, lay it on me.”

“Really?”

“Yep! Ready and raring—”

“I dreamed the world was grinding to a stop, dark side-light side and all was being revealed. My body fell to the dead grass, paralyzed, and my mind’s eye zipped in and out of the heads of several persons. I was staring from the eyes of a woman in the passenger seat of a luxury car. The driver, a corn-fed fellow in a suit, looked at her and *his* eyes went black and his mouth was a hole reversing over his body to reveal something, but my astral self flitted into the ether. The man in the disintegrating suit came after me, saying there was no escape. Then I was inside a raven that swooped over a great brooding mansion where a cheerleader had been impaled upon the weather vane. The mansion sat on an island of dry, dead grass and a sea of darkness rushed in from the horizon. Another raven swooped past me and cawed, ‘Nevermore! Nevermore!’ as if, perhaps, I hadn’t gotten the hint. The man in the suit, far below, pointed at me and I fell out of the sky like a stone.”

He stroked her back through the flimsy nightgown. “Sexual repression.”

“Seriously?”

“That’s what it’s always about. Or death. Got to admit, the death vibe is strong.”

“No, it frightened me. Frightened me in a way I can’t—”

“Most of us find death a scary prospect. Death comes to everyone; no use worrying.” He was an English major with a minor in psychology. A pain in the ass.

“Death isn’t the worst. There’s dementia. Mental anguish. Physical debilitation. Torture. Death is sleep.”

He thought sleep sounded terrific. His eyes were heavy. “Baby, come over here.”

“Come over where?”

He patted her pillow. The case had several large hearts sewn in. A fresh drop of blood formed at the heart of a heart, grew fat, and stained the cotton. A flute shrilled from the shadows where the ceiling sloped down to meet the wall.

She twisted to look at him. Her eyes belonged to an impressionist painting. Eyes Picasso might have given a woman were he in a savage mood. Her

smile extended to her ears. She climbed atop the bed and began to dance. Every gyration swung her jackknifing upper torso closer to him. Her hair grazed his lips. Her lips grazed his lips.

He longed to protest. His muscles were paralyzed.

Somewhere, Sometime III (phone recording; probably Alaska, probably 1979):

Esteban: "… I don't… remember. A fire? Why don't I have scars? Kids screaming… it's like a dream. Not even real though it scares me shitless."

Concerned Friend: "You have nightmares?"

Esteban: "Nightmares, daymares. Flashbacks. It's driving me nuts and all I get are jags of images and sounds. Like a bad trip."

Concerned Friend: "My brother's platoon got hit with a mortar round in 'Nam. Killed thirty-eight of his buddies. He took shrapnel in the leg. Doesn't remember anything. Doctor had to tell him the story when he came to."

Esteban: "Paper says the park exploded. Gas pipes weren't up to code. Whole damned place was sketchy as hell. Duct tape on the rides. Half the staff had prison tats and smelled like liquor. Makes sense there'd be an industrial accident. Makes a plausible story."

Concerned Friend: "Makes sense because that's exactly how it went down. Don't go wrapping that fat head of yours in tinfoil."

Esteban: "I'm not sure. Story they fed the parents, the press, the entire world, is that somebody spiked the refreshments with acid and when the accident happened, we panicked. Bullshit. A couple of the kids were tripping, sure. And we were all boozing, yeah. Acid in the water? No way."

Concerned Friend: "Ain't gonna argue."

Esteban: "Nine kids died. Molly Vile disappeared. None of us talk about it. We try to pretend it didn't happen. Except Butch. Butch thinks it's amusing."

Concerned Friend: "People cope in different ways."

Esteban (after a long pause): "I think Lucius is cheating on me."

Concerned Friend: “She loves you, man.”

Esteban: “Maybe. Her mom sleeps around. Everybody knows it except for Mr. Lochinvar. Like mother, like daughter.”

Concerned Friend: “How much you have to drink? Are you crying? You’re done and you’re full of shit. Lucius ain’t fucking around. Sleep it off.”

Esteban: “She digs older guys…”

Somewhere, Sometime IV (Probably Alaska, probably the latter 1980s):

From the mind of Esteban Mace:

We’d been an item since junior high, but we moved in together during a false Alaska spring in 1980, several months after we realized baby Jessica was on the way. Come real spring I’d ship out for Camp Pendleton and my stint with the United States Marine Corps. My parents were none too pleased and I guess hers weren’t either.

One night we lay in bed as flurries of snow piled against the window. The local oldies station said it wasn’t quite a blizzard but stay indoors with your main squeeze to be on the safe side. As we neared the bottom of a bottle of red wine, she started talking about dead dogs she’d known.

“When I was eleven, my folks went to Florida for a week and I stayed behind with Sasha, the family dog. My dog, really. She was a mix; retriever and something else. Her fur was so soft and it gleamed. I didn’t even brush her that often. She was the mooch queen. Whenever my family would swing over, my parents’ friends were like, ‘Hey, I’m grilling a steak, maybe Sasha would like one’… had to be those big brown eyes, the pleading look. She was a pro, my old gal. You’d a loved her. Everybody did. She slipped out the door one night and got hit by a car on Spenard Road. Vet tried every trick in the book. Six grand later we finally gave her the needle. Shitty way to go.”

I’d seen plenty of pictures of Sasha. A sleek red dog who’d hammed for the camera. A lot of other dog pics too; my girl apparently had a thing, but mostly Sasha. I realized, and for the first time, that she didn’t keep any shots of her current pet, Lily, even though she’d kept the Cavalier Spaniel for seventeen years having inherited full ownership from her mom and dad

junior year of high school. Neither of us really spoke of the dog either. Wheezing and coughing, eternally moribund, Lily had become another piece of furniture, albeit one that had to be moved several times a day. Maybe that was weird.

"Mine committed suicide," I said.

She lit a cigarette, then rolled onto her side and gazed at me. Her eyes shone in the gloom, as if she'd been crying. "I didn't know that was possible. Animals opting out."

"It's possible. Once in a blue moon kind a deal. We had a black lab when I was a kid. Inherited from my granddad who'd named him Buster after that actor Buster Crabbe. Guy who played Tarzan in the dark ages before network TV."

"Handsome fella that BC," she said with languid appreciation.

"Oh, yeah? You ever watch him? Talk about way before our time."

"Grandmother was a fan. Had a steamer trunk with a shitload of memorabilia. She chased autographs when she was a girl. Gable, Hepburn, Kirk Douglas, Douglas Fairbanks, Vivien Leigh; you call it, she had a postcard or photo with the star's John Hancock on there. Crabbe gave her a signed photo of him in his swim trunks, gold medal around his neck. She swooned every time we took it out of the box. Me too, I guess. First erotic dream I ever had was about Buster Crabbe."

I shook the empty wine bottle. "That's a new one on me, honey. Anyway. My black lab didn't give a tinker's damn about Gramps. However, the mutt made friends with one of the horses. They were real tight. Bumped muzzles whenever we visited the corral. After the horse died, poor Buster became despondent and one day he ended it all."

"How did the horse die?"

"Dad shot her."

Lucius exhaled smoke. "Your dad had a good reason?"

"He was a little trigger happy."

"Okay, on with the ballad of Buster."

“Thank you. Buster moped around for weeks. Wouldn’t eat, got really skinny. I tried to cheer him up. You know how kids are. He was my pal. But nothing doing. He sat by the corral gate, head down, mourning. Slept there, rain or shine. Dad had to lug him inside at night because he wouldn’t come on his own. One morning I looked out the window as Buster climbed under the fence and walked into the duck pond. Trudged straight in and sank. Didn’t doggie paddle or anything. Glub, glub, glub. Bunch a bubbles, then zilch. Nobody was around, so I jumped in. Couldn’t find him, though. Dad came home and called a couple of his work buddies to help drag the pond. Found Buster in the silt.”

“That’s it?”

“All she wrote.”

“Might’ve been an accident,” she said.

“No way. I hollered at him right before he went into the drink. He glanced back at me. Never saw an expression like that on a dog. Same look you see on a war widow’s face as she’s weeping in a bombed-out village. Despair. Pure despair.”

We fell asleep on that happy note.

The radio alarm blared “I love the Night” by Blue Oyster Cult at three in the A.M. Time to walk Lily again. Every four hours it had to be done; like feeding and changing an infant, only in this case a dog who’d regressed to puppyhood forever. Lucius snored on her side, belly bulging the coverlet, reminding me that one soul enters as another leaves.

The truth of it was, while I liked dogs, and probably would’ve gotten attached to dearly-departed Sasha too, I didn’t harbor much affection for Lily. She wasn’t particularly friendly, a fact I’d attributed to my status as a Johnny-come-lately, and to her ancientness. She preferred to be left in peace under the table, a vague lump, eyes glistening with inscrutable philosophies; Queen of the Dark upon her satin pillow.

Something is wrong with the baby. You won’t ever know what, you won’t even be alive by the time her curse manifests in full. Neither will Lucius. Lily yawned and her ancient, corroded fangs were larger and brighter than any dog had a right to own.

I snapped awake from the dream-within-a-dream to BOC playing my wakeup serenade, Lucius and the dog snoring and a cold dread in my heart.

Thirty-odd years have rolled by since that dream and the phantom dog had it right—Lucius is vanished, likely dead; my boy Elwood, he's gone too, blown to smithereens in Afghanistan; this ship is taking on water and the black sea will soon drag me down the way it dragged down my would-be son-in-law (see you soon, Jackson Bane!) … Small mercy, Jessica is alive and well and living in Eagle Talon.

Right before I head to the bottom, Lily's ghost says, *Every one of you had your mind wiped that night in Rally. Saps. Behold the terrible truth.*

The secrets of the universe unfold then implode and suck me into an obliterating chamber. I remember everything and know everything, potentially, to come. I'd cry if the pressure and the currents hadn't reduced me to motes of motes.

3. Anchorage, Alaska. Autumn, 1979. (Rabbit Creek)

Rabbit Creek occupied a few neighborhoods and industrial zones between Potter's Marsh and the Chugach National Forest. Basically the ass-end of Anchorage, built atop a thin permafrost crust over primordial muck. Several state geologists had opined the whole area might well sink straight to hell in one of the region's frequent earthquakes. Lucius Lochinvar thought such a cataclysm couldn't happen soon enough.

Cassidy Sloan, helming an Oldsmobile she'd borrowed from her dad, dropped Lucius at Mr. Hyjak's place. It was a few minutes before dark. A light burned on the porch of the split-level house.

Sloan popped a bubble with her pink gum and glared. Her right eye was blacked from a flying elbow at a recent roller derby match.

"Is that a pudge? You don't button your coat anymore. You preggo? Aw shit, you're preggo."

"I am not," Lucius reflexively crossed her fingers.

"Maybe I should hang around. Want me to stay? I can sit here and listen to the radio. In case…"

"In case?"

“I dunno—in case the scene goes sour.”

“He’s nice. He isn’t going to turn into Mr. Goodbar. Besides.” Lucius slapped her purse and its arsenal of knife, hatpin, and mace.

“Nice?” Pop went the gum.

“Like I said, nice. Too nice. He’s a wuss. I scare him.”

“Nice guys ain’t fuckin’ teen girls half their age on the sly.”

“He’s not married.”

“Yeah, that’s weird too. Anyway—forgetting about the Boy Scout?”

“Esteban and I aren’t married either.”

“Same diff.”

“Meet you at the diner. I can book it from here in twenty.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I do it whenever I come over here for a screw.” Lucius climbed out.

Sloan clutched at her sleeve and missed. “The bastard doesn’t even give you a lift after you ball him?”

“Nunya, Sloan. See you in an hour. Pancakes on me.”

“Hell with pancakes. Ronnie Diamond has some people over tonight.”

“I’m saving myself for the bash over at Tooms’ place tomorrow.”

“It’s a pre-party. I dunno. Who cares? We’re goin’ over and getting’ shitfaced to the max. If we screw it up, tomorrow night is do-over.”

“Okay. Meet me at the diner in an hour.”

Alan Hyjak worked as an engineer in Prudhoe Bay which meant he split the year between Barrow and Anchorage. He rented the house and kept a side door unlocked on the nights Lucius stopped over. She went in and felt around in the murk until she reached the living room. It glowed with firelight like the wizard’s lab in *Fantasia*. Peculiar music (perhaps a monumental long-lost Jethro Tull flute solo) floated from a set of speakers as wide as suitcases. Hyjak reposed naked on a bearskin rug before the hearth. Not a shabby bod for an older guy, if a bit pallid.

“Hey, cutie.” He sipped from a tumbler. “Do yourself a drink.”

Lucius sighed and perched on stool by the wet bar. “I won’t be long. We need to talk.”

“Huh. Talk. Talk is never good. Let’s skip it and say we did. Let’s screw.”

She shook her head.

Hyjak sighed. “Don’t tell me. Plans with the boyfriend? As you can see, I got dressed for the occasion. Be a shame to spoil all my efforts.”

“You look cozy.” She studied the room, squinting to discern the mounted wolf head, an oil painting of a Roman coliseum, and the odd, plastic furniture that belonged to a science fiction movie set. “Are you comfortable here? Just you, alone every night?”

“Not every night. I live plenty of my life in a modular with four other guys. Certainly don’t get to lounge around in the buff.”

“Sure you don’t.”

He stroked his chest and winked. “I suppose the joint could stand a woman’s touch… me too!” When she didn’t smile, he rose and stood directly before the fire so the red light made him a silhouette. “It was bound to come to this. The girl has melted and the woman rises in her stead. Reforged and lethal.”

“Alan, Alan. I was never much of a girl. That’s why you’re obsessed with me.”

“Fair enough. I am obsessed. Although it’s not what you think.”

“My friends say it’s weird you don’t have a wife or a girlfriend.”

“What you mean is, your girlfriend, Sloan, says it’s weird.”

“Dude. You live alone in a big house. No pals, no family. You don’t even own a goldfish. Something’s funky.”

“I like to get funky. I like to get down. Why the third degree?”

“Two years. Two years and I haven’t learned anything real except your CV. My hunch? There’s nothing to learn.”

“Because I choose not to share that part of my life with you doesn’t mean it isn’t there.”

“Ouch. Guess you told me.” She spoke quietly, body tensed. The interminable fluting devolved into a single piercing bleep similar to the

emergency broadcast signal, then ceased. Flames crackled. Her heart beat. She hadn't realized how much the music had gotten on her nerves.

"Do my words hurt?" Hyjak said.

She glanced toward a hallway that led deeper into the house. "A pinprick on the Dol Scale." She paid attention in class. "Emphasis on prick. No need to agonize in guilt."

"Guilt isn't my bag. We both got what we wanted and now it's over. Going to miss your precociousness, and them perky tits."

"Precociousness is code for bitchiness."

"Not usually. However, Ambrose Bierce said that politeness is an acceptable form of hypocrisy. I'm curious—is this going how you rehearsed?"

"So far so good, said the man who jumped off the Empire State Building after every floor." Again she glanced toward the hallway. "You have company?"

"Company? According to you, nobody visits me in my hermitage." Hyjak spread his shadowy arms. He undulated to a phantom rhythm. His shadow crawled across the floor, four-armed. "It's only me and thee." He finished his drink and tossed the glass over his shoulder into the fire; kept on swaying. "Since this won't matter much longer, I'll let you in on a secret."

"Ooh, a secret." She reached into her purse and got a cigarette and lit up. The action disguised her true intention as she slipped the mace canister into her left hand. "Okay, I'm ready. Lay it on me." She watched Hyjak's undulating silhouette and considered that Sloan's cynicism might have been warranted. Her man on the side had slipped a gear. Rejection summoned the beast from certain wrecked egos.

"I'm not an engineer; I don't work in Prudhoe Bay; and I don't feel a thing for you, you arrogant little twat." He snapped his fingers. "Damn, that's nice."

"Truly fascinating. Yes, well. Bye." Lucius stood and moved away at an angle. She didn't think the guy would rush her, although she didn't turn her back on him.

"Wait… You're jetting?"

“I am.”

“Ask me what I really do for a job. Ask me who pays the freight. Lucius!”

“Piss up a rope!” she called cheerfully on her way through the door.

“I lie for a living, baby! I lie and I touch myself! My letter sweater spells CIA!”

The door slammed.

Then:

The girl left in a huff.

Mr. Hyjak turned so the heat from the flames warmed his testicles. He shimmied and capered, miming a folk dance. Mr. Speck and Butch Tooms emerged from the passage that led to the bedroom. Both men were also naked. Mr. Speck wore a black baseball cap and black shades. His paunch drooped.

Mr. Hyjak had previously asked Mr. Speck why he always wore a hat. Mr. Speck said his exposed brain matter needed protection from Earth atmosphere.

“Lucky I don’t hurt you,” Butch Tooms said to Mr. Hyjak. “Hurt you bad.”

“Say what? Why would you want to hurt me?”

“Our friend is jealous,” Mr. Speck said.

“Butch, baby—what are you jealous about? Have a drink. Have two.”

“Mr. Tooms is jealous because you’ve copulated with the female he desires.”

“Lochinvar? Yeah? You didn’t… I guess we kept it on the down low. Well, we’re splitsville now. Surely you heard that bad scene?”

“Her departure seemed abrupt,” Mr. Speck said. “The females are deadly and unpredictable. Or the tachyon bombardment of her cells precipitated a hostile mood.”

“Chick dropped me hard. Hey, Butch, go on, fix a drink.”

“Lucky I don’t smash your teeth in.” Butch Tooms spoke in a monotone. His hand tightened into a fist against his hip. “Real lucky, man. Smash your teeth.”

“Should I—?” Mr. Hyjak gestured to Mr. Speck for assistance.

“Should you *what*, Mr. Hyjak?” Mr. Speck took down a bottle of vodka and sniffed, unimpressed.

“Should I kill the music? It’s agitating Butch. Butch, you aren’t chill. You’re uptight.”

Mr. Speck stoppered the bottle. “Kill the music?”

“Yeah. I mean, if it’s all right.”

“The signal isn’t playing at a decibel you are capable of registering. Listen carefully. Yes? The music, as you perceive it, ceased minutes ago. It’s in your head. Your neurons are chasing phantoms.”

“Beautiful,” Butch Tooms said. His fist relaxed. He stared into the gloom and smiled.

“Oh yeah?” Mr. Hyjak said. “Then what’s he listening to?”

“Nothing,” Mr. Speck said. “Echoes of dust falling in a mausoleum in ancient Greece. Your mother climaxing at the moment of your conception. A rabbit decomposing in a bog.”

“Oh, crap,” Mr. Hyjak said. “You aren’t kidding. I can’t hear it anymore.”

“Rubbing your ear won’t help.”

“Oh, crap. Crap!”

“The signal can be damaging. Especially when it transcends the spectrum of physics that operate here.”

“Look, wait. He’s—Butch isn’t on a full dose, right? There are levels of progression to the action threshold. That’s what I was told. We control his escalation with incremental micro-doses. Safe as houses as long as the doses are small. Right? Right? Damn it, you told me to play the recording!”

“Are you British?” Mr. Speck said. “My survey suggested milk-bland USA.”

“No, I’m—you see, my dad—”

“Calm yourself. Death will be among us tomorrow, the next day… soon. Horrors piled upon horrors. Such is the way of the universe.”

“Horrors!” Butch Tooms said.

“Everything’s okay?” Mr. Hyjak said. “I’m bleeding.” He wiped his nose on the back of his hand. “I’ve got a nosebleed. Bad one.”

“A real gusher,” Mr. Speck said.

“Am I dying?”

“No, your brain is softening. The signal is squeezing your frontal lobe the way clay is compressed when the earth shifts. Water oozes from its pores. Perfectly normal. The gray matter must become malleable for our purposes. Malleable, Mr. Hyjak. Be brave.”

Butch Tooms also bled. It dripped from his chin and spattered his toes. He continued to gaze serenely into the grave-cold heart of the cosmos, or wherever. Shadows near the far wall thickened and changed and glimmered purple. Purple-black. Voluptuous, unctuous rings of mute, irradiated darkness. The men’s faces dimmed.

Mr. Hyjak spilled blood from his cupped palm. He glanced around. “Oh. Oh! The music. It’s back! Radical!” He swiveled his hips and arms in a counter rhythm to a low hiss emanating from the speakers.

Mr. Speck inclined his head. His glasses cracked and reflected the purple dark.

Meanwhile (small get-together at Ronnie Diamond’s pad):

“Like, we were all sitting around a campfire in the mountains and Abraham Vile started in with ghost stories. Drinkin’ cocoa and making s’mores and here he comes with the spooky stuff. Ghost stories. I hate em, man…”

“Why you hate ghost stories…?”

“My mom died when I was little…”

“How she die—oh, right. Big C…”

“Man, I told you before, she die of the cancer…!”

“What I said. She got cancer…”

“After she did that, she used to come into my room all late at night and shit, and hang upside down in my closet. The door would swing open and she’d be in there between my sweatshirts and snow jackets, grinnin’ at me, pasty-faced as fuck. That’s why…”

“Your mom ain’t no ghost. She a vampire…”

“See this pistol…?”

“That’s a pellet gun…”

“Yeah, that’s right. I blow a hole through your head. Dump you in Rabbit Creek…”

“I’d come back as a ghost and fuck you up…”

“Man, you’re outta beer,” Jeff Vellum said, staring disconsolately into the fridge. The pale light rendered his broad features vaguely moon-like. “This is our last fling before we part ways for college and you’re dry.” He wandered away in defeat.

“Oops,” Jimmy said. “Jackie’s gonna nut him for returning empty-handed.”

“College, my ass,” Esteban said, trying not to slur. Jimmy, Jackie, Jeff, and J—the four J’s. He’d downed a man’s portion of a sixer of Bud. “Some of us whose names don’t begin with J are headed for vocational school after a pit stop in the military and glad for it. This isn’t the last fandango, man. Tooms’ shindig, tomorrow night. Tomahawk Park Survivors bash.” The prospect didn’t thrill him—he’d toned down the old drinking game and his current heroics were sure to exact a stiff price.

“Make a beer run?” Jimmy said. “Anybody got any cash? I don’t.”

“I’ll just put it on my Diner’s Card,” Ronnie Diamond said. “No worries.” He’d played offensive tackle, all state. His hair hung long as his daddy’s (doing fifteen to life in Spring Creek). He owned a hand-me-down Harley (dead uncle) and an El Camino (jailed uncle).

“Diner’s Card?” Esteban said.

“Yeah. I got a Diner’s Card. Check it, dude.”

Esteban and Jimmy looked at each other.

“Ronnie, I thought you were broke,” Jimmy said. “You owe me twenty bucks.”

“Right, but I got plastic.”

“Wait, what are you talking about?” Esteban said.

“What are YOU talking about, man?” Ronnie said with sudden panic in his eyes.

“But when you have to pay the balance—”

“The balance?”

Jimmy cracked up. “Yeah, pay it down at the end of the month. What did you think, dumbass?”

“Like, it’s money in a bank, only negative.”

“Ronnie, that’s not—”

“Y’know, you spend a hundred bucks and you can’t spend it again until you put some money back.”

“No, dude, no. It’s a short term loan. The company charges interest.”

“Oh, dear God.” Ronnie’s color drained to match his dingy white tee.

“Thanks for the beer!” Timbi Showalter yelled from the sofa.

“Hurrah!” Abraham Vile yelled from the opposite end of the sofa. He had a can in each hand. The stereo blared “I’m Not in Love.” Some of the kids were pretending to dance. Mainly they were content to grind against one another.

The doorbell rang. Cassidy Sloan and Lucius Lochinvar waltzed into the kitchen. Sloan shoved past the boys. She rummaged through the fridge, her habitual frown deepening.

“Where’s the damned beer?” She slammed the fridge and rummaged through the cabinets.

“Hey.” Esteban kissed Lucius’ cheek. She gripped his hand, hard. He didn’t like the dark-bright glare in her eyes. “What’s the matter?”

“Absolutely nothing. Ronnie, where’s your mom?”

“Beatrice got called in to the hospital,” Ronnie said. “Sloan! No way, dude, that’s Bea’s secret, double secret, stash. Don’t fucking touch that shit; she measures it with a dipstick.”

“I would too, with you around, you fucking lush.” Sloan unscrewed the top and had a jolt of Mrs. Diamond’s private stock of Johnnie Walker Black.

“Let’s go,” Lucius seized Esteban’s arm.

“Uh, baby, I’m not quite done—”

“You’re done.”

“She got all the testosterone in your relationship,” Jimmy said.

“Not all… a bunch,” Esteban said.

Lucius dragged him through the house to Ronnie’s room where everybody had piled their jackets on Ronnie’s bed. She pushed him down and unbuckled his belt one-handed. Her eyes grew shinier by the heartbeat.

“Sweetie,” he said as she shucked his jeans. “I’m not complaining, but why?”

“Dunno. It feels important.”

“I don’t—”

She squeezed his throat. One squeeze and done. She raised her skirt and mounted him and he lost his train of thought.

Somewhere, Sometime V (Probably New England, the early Aughts):

From the mind of Lucius Lochinvar Mace

Esteban and the kids think I ran away from home. Wish I could tell them the truth that every night after Tomahawk Park and every night after the post high school bash at the Toomses has taught me cheating death isn’t necessarily the way to go.

Here I am at the end of the road and no brakes.

Doctors C & R put me through a battery of tests. Psychological, physical, chemical. They strap me into a machine called the Black Kaleidoscope and send my consciousness into astral projection mode. A sort of regression therapy.

Some tech gives me a horse needle of happiness and then the drip goes in smooth, trickles down my throat and into my heart. The tech slips red headphones over my ears and right off the bat I recollect all kinds of neat shit like…

…how my brothers and I exchanged jewelry for Christmas and weapons on birthdays and that sweet moment when I punched Jackie Brock in the kisser in middle school. I slashed my knuckles on her braces and stood over her, her limbs like matchsticks at odd angles to one another, and uttered a curse *May you come back as a chandelier—hang by day, burn by night!* Two and a half decades of water under the bridge and I still savor that moment, hold

it in my mouth like the sweetest liquor… The day Jessica came into the world, my firstborn, lovely angry doomed daughter. I'm sorry, kid, for what will come…

Problem is, I can't stop, can't even slow down and memory unravels around me at 16X speed. A phantom wind tears me to ribbons with razor shards of my past misdeeds. Dr. Campbell had cautioned that whatever resides within a traveler gets writ large inside the Kaleidoscope and I'd stifled a giggle thinking of Yoda dispatching Luke to that cave in *The Empire Strikes Back.* Laughing out the other side of my face now.

Oh, the misery of an eventful life. The things you discover when blood is oozing from your nose and the silver screen of your mind's eye collapses inward and reveals an ice sheet and a red nail bed of horizon. A figure in an anorak with the hood up approaches.

My dead uncle, Bradley, says, *Your daughter is born of evil, your sons will be sacrificed as I was sacrificed. I loved your mother.* True confessions of the dearly-departed. His blackened hand sears my cheek with cold. Doesn't seem to matter he'd gotten obliterated in Vietnam, he's put himself together again. I convince myself that the blast had hurled him into a parallel universe. That's what ghosts are—souls who've reconstituted a frequency up or down the radio dial. Death as we know it is simply a process of osmosis, a trickle charge into a cosmic battery. Hard to tell whether that's a pleasant thought or a preview of Hell.

Three non-human intelligences interfere with the course of life on Earth the way little kids play with ant farms. Your doctor friends are in the know and they are only aware of two of the players. You're at the end of your rope, sweetheart. We'll be together real soon.

Uncle Brad hums a strange melody; a Saturday kid's show actor summoning cardboard flying saucers from the interstellar divide. It gives me the mother of all ear worms. Ice buckles and groans and stars rush toward me.

I crash back into the here and now, fling the headphones aside and draw down with Beasley's (the unhandsome, but spectacularly virile bodyguard/valet to the scientists) spare Saturday Night Special that I've taped against the small of my back, uncomfortable to say the least, and aim

it at Dr. C. I'm no Annie Oakley. Still, I feel better holding the gun, feel more in control, illusory as that might be. Somebody had neglected to tick the box next to *Propensity for Violence* on my chart. Goes to show that psych evaluations aren't all created equal.

"Mr. Beasley and his unsecured firearms," Dr. C says, disappointed. He's survived cannibals, cultists, intestinal parasites, kidnapping and torture in the Far East, and decades as second-fiddle to his senior partner, the infamous Dr. R. A girl with a gun doesn't scare him unduly. "Do you mind?" He strikes a match from the case he keeps in his coat pocket and lights his pipe. "I didn't foresee this variable. My calculations need a double-check. Is that weapon loaded, Mrs. Mace? Does your family know where you've run off to? Does your husband?"

"Don't worry about them. The fam is used to my comings and goings."

"Yes. They assume you've run away with one of your many flings. Excellent cover. Do you maintain the façade for their protection or your convenience?"

"A little of column A, a little of column B."

I divide my attention between him and the rear wall of the interview room. A fractal three-dee print adorns the otherwise bare wall. Psychotropic dope still swims through my consciousness. It puffs in tiny cotton detonations and clouds my blood with lead sinkers. The whine of a drill bit scratches at my brain, high and thin. Muzak of dead stars.

"Who the fuck is behind that wall?" I say.

"You are under the influence of a powerful hallucinogen. It has rendered you more volatile than usual. There is nothing behind the wall."

"Try again."

"A friend of some friends."

"Not helpful, doc."

"I could tell you, but then you'd have to kill yourself." He smirks and inhales from his pipe. A cold, contemptuous gesture from a wizened child who fried ants with a magnifying glass. Also, possibly, a dare.

I take his dare and cock the hammer. I swing the barrel until it points where the red and gold panels intersect behind the print. "*What*. What is behind

the wall?”

“I am sure you remember your old friend, Mr. Speck. His interference helped transform you, mutate you.”

“He’s gone.” My mouth tastes sour. Suppressed memories of slaughter and mayhem yammer and boil behind a psychic dam I’ve built with drugs and raw willpower.

“Speck is gone, yes. Amanda Bole yet lurks; we know not where. Those two had enemies, or rivals, if you will. Competing interests for the hearts and minds of Terra. Some of them are here with us, recording this conversation. These… neighbors have emerged from the deep places to observe and advise. Ostensibly our friends mean well. However, their temperament is hazardous to the health of obstreperous primates.”

“Show me the man behind the curtain.”

“You’ll regret it instantly.”

“Will I?”

He breathes out a cloud. “It is worse than you can imagine.”

“Bullshit. I’ve seen the worst.”

“Wrong, my dear. Look, if you’re going to be a prig, put the gun into your mouth and do us both a favor. Or shoot me first, if you please.”

“Fine, Mr. Wizard. I call.” I squeeze off the entire magazine into the fractal print and whatever alleged monstrosity lurks behind the thin paneling. Bull’s eye.

Fuck me running, the doctor knew whereof he spoke. It is worse.

4. Rally, Washington. Spring, 1977 (Sample from Massacre)

The gang from Alaska ran amok an entire day at Tomahawk Park with only one major casualty (Jude Kowalski busted his arm on a concrete water slide) and a few bumps and bruises (the aforementioned slide and a go-cart duel between Keith Norse and Jimmy Flank that concluded in a six cart pileup and a tire fire). The park had operated since 1957 and garnered a reputation for shoddy construction, incompetent employees, and third world

safety standards. Everyone agreed (as bandages and casts were applied) that it had exceeded expectations.

After showering away (most of) the chlorine, everybody chowed on burgers. Small groups formed and slipped away for a secluded beach on the river. Ronnie Diamond and Esteban recruited a half-dozen warm bodies to secure driftwood for the epic bonfire. Jeff Vellum ignited the sucker with a splash of unleaded gasoline. The resulting fireball could've been sighted from space and singed his eyebrows off. Somebody with a fake ID had secured a keg of the good stuff and plenty of cases of PBR and Colt 45 for backup. Mr. Three Trees and Mr. Hyjak got Mrs. Buntline crocked on margaritas at the Fat Boy so the kids could have their fun unimpeded. Esteban heard Butch Tooms (courtesy Daddy Tooms' bankroll) slipped the so-called chaperones a C-note to make it happen.

Meanwhile:

Threnody Rudnick and Molly Vile stayed behind in room 119, an end unit on the wing that lay in gloom beneath a stand of Douglas firs. The light over the door also *happened* to be broken, ensuring a multitude of shadows to cloak young ne'er-do-wells, Bobby Flank and Vern Oglesby. The boys (hockey players both) peeped through the window and a narrow divide in the drapes, watching as the girls laughed drunkenly and undressed one another. Led Zeppelin played "Black Dog" as Molly Vile leaned in and laid a kiss on Rudnick.

"See, told ya," Vern said.

"I hope Butch don't catch us," Bobby said. His head was on a swivel for Butch Tooms.

"Be totally worth it."

"Getting maimed isn't a fun way to end a vacation."

"He wouldn't maim us, he'd murder us."

"Goddamnit, they aren't taking off their bras," Bobby said after a while.

"Give it a minute." Vern hesitated. "Dude… You hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Sounded like… sounds like…"

“Aw, I think you’re right—they’re just going to neck. What a gyp!”

“… a whistle. You don’t hear it?”

“Man, this is PG bullshit,” Bobby said. “I vote we haul ass to the beach and get lit.” He realized Vern wasn’t crouched beside him anymore. “Vern?”

To Bobby’s right, a door slammed and a car engine fired. Lights twinkled across the parking lot. To his left, the great black mass of trees inhaled the light and gave back scents of sap, fir needles, and deathly must.

A night bird screamed. Chimes jangled. Wind chimes? He strained to determine the direction and proximity. The sound changed. Whistling? Pipes? The melody floated from the woods, near then far. His muscles went rigid and he gripped the window sill. His nails dug in and split. The sinews in his neck spasmed and he bit through his tongue.

A shape rose from where it had lain in a bed of dead leaves. Its eyes collected sparks of sodium fire. The shape seized Bobby. It pried his jaws apart and formed a seal with its own mouth, and drank. Bobby remained a statue. A vein in his temple pulsed, pulsed…

Meanwhile (Inside 119):

Molly Vile broke off her kiss. “Whoa, weird.”

“That you want to parlay roller-skating into a profession?” Threnody Rudnick said. “Sounds golden.”

“Thanks. I heard something…”

“Make with the smooching already.” Lost in euphoria, Threnody Rudnick didn’t open her eyes. She’d nearly forgotten they were simply warming up for the main event, if lover boy Butch (and the promised eight-ball) could be troubled to make an appearance.

“Swear to gods somebody whispered my name.” Molly crossed her arms defensively. “I think one of those perv hockey guys is spying on us.”

“Which one?”

“Take your pick. Could be the whole team.”

“We should charge a buck a peek.”

Molly sighed. She went to the window and stood for a few moments. “Ugh, can’t see a damned thing. The light’s not on. Bulb burned out, or I don’t

know.”

“Squash your tits on the glass and wait a few seconds for a reaction.”

“Threnody, be serious.”

“Deadly serious.” Threnody undid her bra and gave it a twirl while jiggling her boobs directly at the window and the theoretical peeping jackasses. “Hey, chickie, I double dog dare ya! Off with your top!”

Molly’s scandalized expression dissolved and she laughed. A moment later both girls faced the window and shook their assets with the gusto, if not the finesse, of seasoned burlesque dancers. The lamp on the dresser dimmed and brightened as its bulb filled with blood and emitted purple light. Led Zeppelin vanished into softly buzzing static. Patterns of purple light spun on the ceiling.

“Satan’s watching,” Molly said. Her bra dangled in her left hand. She turned from the window and tilted her head back to study the weird lightshow.

Threnody’s sense of pleasurable sloth dissolved. Her thighs cramped the way they occasionally did after a marathon skating session. The radio static hummed and drilled into her brain, pulsing in synchronicity with the lamp. Instinctively, and with tremendous effort, she extended her leaden arm and slapped the radio power button to OFF.

“Satan’s watching. Satan’s watching!” Molly raised her voice to counter the abrupt stillness. She laughed with great gulping inhalations. She clasped her hands and raised them and danced in place. The front door flew open and slammed closed. The window shattered inward. A severed head rebounded from the far wall and rolled under the table. Threnody’s fuzzed brain required several moments to process this development, to evaluate the array of implications. A second severed head struck a fake Vermeer still life and left a bloody splotch.

“That’s fucking it!” Naked except for panties and go-go boots, she grabbed the edge of the mattress and flipped it against the window. Fighting wasn’t her gig (thus she hadn’t made the roller derby squad despite above average skating chops; the fact practically killed her inside), and she didn’t know what to do next. She locked the door and shoved a chair under the knob like she’d seen it done in the movies. Now, to find a weapon…

Molly fell to her knees and screamed a singsong prayer. “O Horned God, haunter of the Black Forest of Night, forgive our weakness! Ravish me, Devil! Devour my unworthy soul! Bear my disemboweled corpse aloft to the Nemesis Star—”

“Shut up!” Threnody yanked her friend’s hair and as the girl recoiled, claws bared like a pissed cat.

Molly curled into a ball, mewling Latin. Had she secretly taken wannabe goth lessons from Jackie Brock? The door swung wide and the chair shattered. Butch Tooms lurched across the threshold. He wore a white paper suit similar to the work clothes of a janitor or hazardous materials laborer. Blood spackled his shiny white arms. His dead white welder’s mitts glittered with embedded glass shards and roofing nails and hanks of hair.

“Why are you doing this?” Threnody tried not to whine. Terror inflated her body and lifted her to tiptoes. She’d suspected Butch had a screw or two loose—although nothing this dramatic. Her more cynical angels whispered, *Told ya so!*

Butch Tooms showed his teeth. “Teenagers experimenting with sex, drugs, and devil music. A cursed theme park and a toxic waste site. The summoning ritual is complete.”

“Satan? We’ve summoned the Dark Lord!” Molly Vile gazed up at him with rapt adoration.

“No, sweet thing. You summoned me.” He slapped her face off, lazily as a grizzly taking a swipe at immobilized prey. Bits splattered the lamp and stuck to the wall. A coarse, jagged pipe note warbled from outside. His eyes rolled and his nose streamed blood. “Oh, the strident caller beckons. Come with me, girl.”

Threnody snatched the lamp and slung it by the cord at Butch Tooms’ head. Porcelain and glass exploded. She dove past her nemesis and through the open door—

tomahaSomewhere, Sometime VI (Probably Alaska, probably the 21st Century):

From the Mind of Julie Brock Vellum:

I came home from a West Coast appearance a few nights ago, and as I sat on a bench in the terminal, the late August light moved like a glacial sheet across the stained carpet and the pants legs of businessmen and stockings of businesswomen and caught in momentary flares in the buckles and clasps and bits of jewelry. Their hair spray shone like glints from helmets. A Boeing 747 rolled into its dock and cut off the sunrays. Dinosaurs died beneath a meteor's shadow; oceans scummed over with ice and farther out, a rime of salt. Elsewhere, a star exploded and cooked a solar system where, fortunately, no organism more complex than a microbe existed. We're next one day.

I went back to the moleskin notebook, dutifully recording the names of the several new enemies I'd made at the conference. My boyfriend hates that I do this. He says, *Julie, you're borrowing trouble.* I'm like, *Rent to own!*

He's a new boyfriend. Seven months and ticking. I haven't bothered to memorize his name. He's Brian the fourth (fifth?). Brian the first was killed three years ago. I hid in a wicker laundry hamper while a shadowy figure disemboweled him with a carving knife. Man, it seemed to go on forever. The killer took his sweet time, pulling out the intestines and making a neat pile. He did it slow to keep Brian awake, I guess. Stuffed some of the guts into his mouth to muffle the screams. Most of it has gotten fuzzy in my mind. I vomited once and orgasmed twice. So, I totally won.

My shrink says you have to do what it takes to survive. He says a lot of people look down on survivors. He says I could be a rich wife. I always smile slyly and think it's better to be a rich girl with a secret life. My head hurts all the time.

Mom… Jackie… kicked the bucket last month. Aneurism. Figures…

(after a significant time lapse)

… it has been nice to stay here at my buddy Roland's ranch in Montana for a few weeks. Up late working on the project. Roland and his family went into town this afternoon, so it's me, the house, and the animals. Huge thunderstorm rolled through a few hours ago. Now the moon is a blur through those torpedo clouds you see in horror flicks, and the wind is roaring. The property takes on a completely different character when the family is absent. There's that sense of the wilderness waiting to reclaim its

territory, that those goodbyes and slamming car doors, then the long silence after, is the first sign. The Only light is the kitchen light. The other You stands out there in the dark, watching me do dishes. She slurps from a badly-patched wineglass and works on the problem of getting in…

Mom and I didn't always get along when she was alive. It's better now.

5. Anchorage, Alaska. Autumn 1979 (Tomahawk Park Survivors Party):

The Tooms family home sat atop a hill with views of everywhere. Three stories plus the unfinished basement—the Bear Den; Pluto's Ballroom. Lucius wondered if anybody else found the basement creepy—dripping pipes, chest-high cinderblock walls and exposed soil, and cracks that reminded her of animal burrows. The other kids seemed oblivious to the Edgar Allan Poe décor as they boozed and danced with pagan abandon.

Butch Tooms had the run of the place for several days (his parents, two younger brothers, and sister flew the coop for somewhere sandy and tropical) and what with the gang scattering to the four winds, it seemed apropos to throw a wild farewell party. The Tomahawk Park Survivors Party and Raffle, according to Butch Tooms. Every guest received an engraved invitation (a cheapo flyer) and a ticket for the drawing. Timbi Showalter asked what the prizes were. Butch Tooms said, sanity, prosperity, a good fuck, and a clean death. Timbi Showalter laughed because her host laughed.

This hoedown had it all: catered munchies; liquor galore; kegs of beer (cheap and imported, depending on one's preference); plenty of Maryjane; a pair of college guys to man the turntables; and a big fat glitter ball hoisted to a place of resplendent honor in the basement ceiling.

A quarter past nine and Jimmy Flank had already gotten sloppy drunk on boilermakers. Lucius watched him perform the "lean" on Cassidy Sloan, who rolled her eyes and smiled with thin-lipped patience as the kid explained how he planned to ditch Alaska and become a private eye. Jimmy didn't confine his drinking to parties; he got going around breakfast time and never throttled back. Esteban worried this portended a sign of misery to come; tonight and for all the nights of Jimmy's life.

Jimmy said, “I stopped being afraid of bigger guys ’cause they ain’t tougher. Nicked my throat shaving with Dad’s straight razor and the blood oozed and for a split second, it wasn’t my face in the mirror, it was a Roman centurion getting his throat cut. I was a bad, bad man in a past life. Fuckers had to sneak up to take me out. Nah, what scares me are these dreams I have of getting buried alive.”

Lucius winked at Sloan and cast around for Esteban without luck. It alarmed her to realize that she’d become more than a little possessive of the boy. She frowned and twisted her rings until they abraded flesh. This weak sister bullshit wouldn’t do. The room, the music, the drunk and stoned teens grinding against one another on a patch of dizzily illuminated floor made her queasy. An odd, butterfly sensation in her stomach had come and gone all day. Keyboard notes and synthesizers combined for a strident melody that excited the dancers. The light dimmed to infrared and their faces slackened and tightened and altered. The light brightened and all was vapid and normal. Her stomach settled.

She headed upstairs contemplating a nice quiet smoke break on the front porch. Such is the inevitably of certain patterns in the narrative of the universe that she poked around the main floor instead. Compared to the sweaty, bass-thumping confines of the cellar, the central living areas stretched cool and dim and tomblike.

“You should’ve stayed home tonight…” Mr. Hyjak stood in the light of an accent lamp, his arms crossed. Unshaven, pale, and fox-sharp in the eyes, as if he’d recently returned from a tour of the wilds. “We might lose control. Butch has plans for your sweet ass. Be interesting to see who prevails—Speck or Speck’s toy.”

Lucius strode past him, insolence disguising her surprise and discomfort. She didn’t speak; his words neither invited nor required an answer. She wore her leather jacket over a blouse and skirt and fancy hiking shoes. Sensible clothes for partying or fighting. The switchblade lay heavy in her jacket pocket. She’d punched her share of foes; smacked one or two around with a club, and given others a sound kicking. Could she actually stab someone? Mr. Hyjak’s dull, covetous expression convinced her, yes, definitely, if her safety depended on it.

Mr. Hyjak said, “Speck says there’s two kinds of human female—prey and predator. There’s but one kind of man. Smoke that, Lochinvar.”

Smiling J bolted out of a doorway at the end of the hall. He moaned a litany that she couldn’t quite understand. He grimaced at her and fled up the stairs. A metallic pinging emanated from the room he’d vacated. Lucius recalled a nightmare that went similar to this. Was she in a dream? The sensations of helplessness and inevitability suggested a waking dream, and yet the sights and sounds, the copper fear on her tongue, made a case for awful, violent reality. She went to the doorway and beheld a tableau in the Tooms kitchen.

Butch Tooms leaned over the center island, shirtless and clad in a stocking mask, black linen pants, and combat boots. The stocking squashed his features. She shouldn’t have recognized him, except it occurred to her she’d seen him with the mask once before under similar circumstances.

He plunged his fists into a pair of mixing bowls. Crunch, crunch, crunch! The bowls were full of broken glass and sharp bits of metal. A man in a black ball cap and sunglasses rubbed Butch Tooms’s shoulders the way a corner man prepares his boxer in the minutes before a fight.

The man in the shades said, “Hi, Lucius Lochinvar. Have you heard the golden tone?”

“You!” she said. A dim nightmare memory bobbed to the surface—Butch Tooms in his stocking mask pursued her through a maze of silent waterslides while Hyjak, Smiling J, and the man in glasses, Mr. Speck, watched through binoculars from atop a building, and laughed. “I got away… How did I get away?” She’d backhanded Butch Tooms with her fancy new watch and chipped the faceplate. He’d accepted the blow the way a telephone pole might be expected to absorb a punch.

“We permitted you to escape. Your future and the future of your progeny represent a matrix of fascinating variables.” He whistled softly and the sound sent a chill into her heart. “The signal can be modulated to achieve a variety of effects. Homicidal mania, punctuated equilibrium, and cellular mutation. I am interested to discover how it interacts with human embryos. Half the female subjects present are impregnated. You people are fecund as

rabbits. My two-year experiment is expanding into a multigenerational project…”

Butch Tooms raised his arms. Glass, razorblades, and nails studded the gray, wasted flesh and embedded in tendon and bone. “I’m ready. I’m…” He gobbled and gargled as Mr. Speck gently shucked the stocking. Instead of his features relaxing, the opposite occurred. Butch Tooms’ mouth wrapped around his cheeks. His eyes elongated and thinned back toward his ears.

Lucius split. She sprinted to the front entrance and flung open the door and nearly took a fateful plunge into a purple-black void shot through with the occasional dying star. “Are you shitting me?”

“The maze is closed until we determine the outcome of this phase.” Mr. Speck’s voice traveled to her from the length of the abruptly lightless hallway. “Tell us, have you noted any sensory enhancements today? Acute sight or hearing? Increased strength?”

Butch Tooms shambled forth. He’d seized Mr. Hyjak’s neck and now dragged the man’s body as he came at her, free hand extended and shiny and sharp. She acted on impulse—she took two steps away from the portal and the sucking void and latched onto a granite slab coffee table that rather nicely pulled the room together. She flung it like a discus and the slab decapitated Butch Tooms and shattered against a wall somewhere in the darkness. Butch Tooms keeled over and lay on his side, pumping blood. His limbs twitched.

“I’m gonna go with heightened strength,” Lucius said.

“It won’t be enough,” Mr. Speck said right beside her. He easily caught her right hook and sent her flying across the room with a dismissive flick. “Crawl, girl. Hey, I said crawl!”

She scrambled to her feet and limped for her life.

Meanwhile (The Donald Pleasence Effect):

“There’s the Donald Pleasence Effect to consider,” Abraham Vile said, wiping a stray tear from the tip of his nose. Melancholy consumed him since his sister Molly disappeared at Tomahawk Park. He’d cornered Esteban (who’d gone in quest of an unoccupied toilet) on the second floor

of the Tooms manse and dove into an analysis of his latest film of the century, John Carpenter's *Halloween*. Esteban tried not to panic. He was half in the bag and armed with a semi-full can of Rainier. He sighed and slumped at the foot of Mr. and Mrs. Tooms' king-sized bed and waited for it to end.

Abraham wiped beer foam from his lips. "Gonna do my dissertation on the relationship between Loomis, Laurie Strode, and Michael Myers. I mean, it's a low-budget flick and you can't trust the editing. Still, Carpenter's no fool. The Shape isn't a little boy psycho grown into a hulking adult psycho. No, sir. The Shape is a receptacle of evil. Evil wears Michael like a suit, it manipulates him. Sure, violent injury can temporarily slow The Shape—he, or it, is limited by mortal frailty. Yet, three quarters of the film and Myers mows through sanitarium employees, German Shepherds, teens great and small, and then boom! Jaime Lee Curtis eludes him at every turn and Loomis takes him down with a .38 revolver. Before Myers gets blasted through the window, it's clear he's afraid of the doctor. The doctor is Yang to the babysitter's Ying; masculine maturity and female fertility conjoined. The Shape can't handle it and bails. Takes the bullets and hoofs it when nobody's looking."

"Yeah," Esteban said in a feeble attempt to participate. "I didn't understand how Loomis and his popgun were a threat to Myers. He's a killing-machine."

"The Loomis figure represents the priesthood, the Judeo-Christian alliance against Satan. That gun isn't a gun, it's a crucifix. Satan wilts when the power of Christ compels him."

"Wow, dude. Going to be a bitchin' thesis."

"I know!"

Smiling J entered the master bedroom. His face was blotched and puffy. He groaned and turned on his heel and ran away.

"Jeez, that guy," Abraham said with solemn pity. "Not a film lover, either."

Something crashed downstairs hard enough to shake the bed.

"I better go see who's wrecking the joint." Esteban rejoiced at the opportunity to gracefully make his exit. He descended to the main hall and

discovered a chunk of stone tabletop wedged in the wall and the overhead lights sparking and fizzing. In his confusion, he tripped over some jackass sleeping in the middle of the floor and went sprawling. His head rebounded from the tiles and as consciousness ebbed, he could've sworn he was lying in a pool of blood, that blood was oozing into his mouth…

Meanwhile II:

Lucius returned to the basement, seeking the safety of numbers. She tried, at any rate. The narrow stairwell twisted at a strange angle and she stumbled into a chamber made of brass plates and a concrete floor. Double doors slammed shut and sealed her fate.

Mr. Speck waited patiently. "To think, a mere flute solo could induce such dramatic metabolic changes. Were you to live another thirty years, I'm confident you'd exhibit an array of phenomenal adaptive responses. You'd transcend the bonds of your waterlogged skin and become superhuman by any local objective measure. The tiny mass of cells incubating within your womb represents even greater potential. A girl, by the way. That's why, upon due consideration, I've decided to cut to the chase and dig it out of you and take my leave." He flexed his fingers like a pianist limbering up.

To her credit, she didn't dwell upon the unreality of the situation; she didn't assume someone had dosed her with LSD and everything was a hallucination. She didn't bother with who, what, or why. Mr. Speck was insane, or something far worse, or she'd fallen headfirst into a nightmare of the likes Alice never conceived. Lucius simply bared her teeth and girded herself for whatever fresh hell came next.

"I *have* felt strange today. Feels like a high voltage current in my guts." She clenched her right hand. "I'm a mother, you say?"

"Yes, for a moment longer."

"Mothers are dangerous animals, Mr. Speck. Don't underestimate us."

"Dangerous animals are still animals."

"When I kill you will it all be over?"

"We control everything you see and hear. One experiment ends and another begins. So, yes, and no."

She tried to answer, but the electric sensation spread from her middle and blocked her throat. Power filled her lungs. Power clogged her veins. Lucius stared at her fist. Bubbles formed in the metal of her rings. Crimson radiation leaked between her fingers and boiled down her arm. Her reflection warped in the brass double doors—her eyes were violet magma against the silhouette of her skull. Her jacket flapped gently, like a cape. The concrete walls flexed in, then out, with the rhythm of her breath.

The angel on her left shoulder, the teenaged spirit who delighted in cruelty and schadenfreude, murmured that perhaps Mr. Speck's experiment with punctuated equilibrium had surpassed his estimation.

"Now, now, Lucius—" Mr. Speck said.

She laughed and swung.

Somewhere, Sometime VII (The Purgatory of Slasher Victims, 1977):

…Molly Vile dove through the motel doorway and plummeted into a well of darkness. The fall knocked the breath from her lungs. After a flash of sickening pain, her legs went dead. She dragged herself forward, digging her nails into soft earth. The night sky glazed and coagulated until it scraped her shoulders and spine. She crawled through a dirt tunnel lit by the soft purple light. Rivulets of blood glistened between her fingers and trickled over patches of bare rock. Butch Tooms could be gaining. She imagined him at her heels, expressionlessly burrowing with his arms at his sides like an earthworm. The visual elicited a gibbering moan and spurred her onward.

She forced her way through an opening, born again. A steep downslope caught her by surprise and she began to slide across a stone rim scored with ancient grooves that channeled the streams of blood toward a lip and a vertical drop. She wedged her forearms into the groove and arrested her momentum, albeit only for an instant or two. Long enough she took in the Plutonian vault, its upper limits shrouded in pinkish miasma.

The stone rim encircled a colossal pit sloshing full with a lake of blood and gore and partially-submerged bodies. Hundreds of tunnel exits, like the one she'd crawled through, drooled crimson above the pit. Each of the tunnels periodically emitted a battered and bloodied figure. Some alive, some dead;

girls and boys alike, each wounded, each fleeing a mortal doom only to land someplace worse. The living corpses came skidding down the sluices and plopped into the frothy stew.

Molly tried to reverse direction and climb toward the mundane awfulness of her own past. She shrieked prayers to her God. Unfortunately, her God didn't seem to be present and there was no going home.

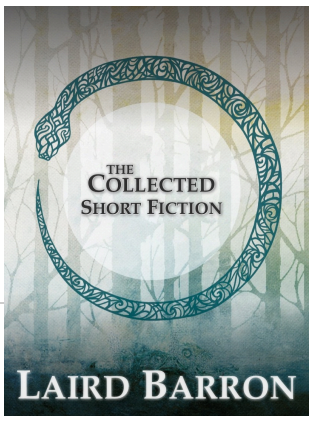
Epilogue (Anchorage, winter 1979/1980):

Esteban didn't remember the party. He'd gotten crocked and smacked his skull. Lucky to be alive, the docs said.

"We're pregnant," Lucius said with menacing cheer as she snuggled into the hospital bed next to him.

"Oh, sweetheart, that's wonderful!" Esteban's own smile concealed his horror.

Another Me



This version taken from Laird Barron's website,
January 2017
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doppelgänger

noun dop·pel·gäng·er \ˈdä-pəl-ˌgaŋ-ər, -ˌgeŋ-, ˌdä-pəl-ˈ

***1:** a ghostly counterpart of a living person*
***2a**: double*
—Meriam Webster Dictionary

Meet the other me, is what the killer allegedly wrote in a text to his friend. Psycho and pal were arguing over gods know what. Maybe you've heard of this dude—a down on his luck strangler drifting through Ohio. Nice fellow. But like those cool reversible European jackets, he had another half.

It didn't have to go that way. He might as well have said, *meet another me.* But it's no surprise some of us get a raw deal, in this life and all the rest.

—I saw you on the train tracks. Course I'm sure. The hell were you doing on the tracks anyway?

I was thirty-one when my left eardrum popped and sent a wet strand of vitreous pearls along my jaw. I took a knee as the world canted off its axis. Then I took myself to the hospital for a brain scan. A technician shot me full of radioactive dye and helped me into an open-lid coffin. The machine's coil knocked like a rubber-jacketed sledgehammer for the next forty-five minutes. According to the doctor, the scan didn't reveal anything of note—no obstruction, no tumor, no answers regarding permanent deafness on my

left side. He brusquely revealed the scan on a light board and ushered me from his office at the earliest opportunity.

During a follow-up consultation, my girlfriend requested a copy of the image. A former art major, she intended to use the brain scan in some macabre installation. The doctor declined, citing some obscure regulatory protocol. She pressed. The doctor remained icily polite, but I recall the glitter of sweat on his forehead and how his hand trembled as he shuffled files.

There was a moment in the parking lot, as yellow leaves rushed around my ankles, and a kid with a blower roaring across the street, that every sound hit me in stereo. The binaural sensation lasted for a moment before the omnipresent tinnitus drone returned forever.

Well, forever except for moments of weakness. Yeah, there are moments I hear everything crystal clear.

—Hey man, what were you doing in Gas Works Park at 5 A.M.? Don't you live in the U?

I celebrated my twenty-first during the annual Iditarod sled dog race with a shot of blackberry brandy from the flask of a great Alaskan adventurer who has since died and more's the pity. Several days and a few hundred miles down the trail, a blizzard howled down from the north and pinned me and my team of huskies on the shore of Norton Sound among the Topkok hills. Those are big, treeless hills blasted down to tough scrub brush, rock, and a jagged rind of ice.

We were trapped for thirty-six hours. Occasionally, as I hunkered inside the sledbag, I dreamed that the storm lifted and we'd made it across the finish line on Front Street in Nome. Wind slapped me awake. It sucked the heat from lungs and wicked those dreams out of my head. The cold wrapped around me, crawled inside me, froze the socket of my right eye, froze my asshole tight as an uncovered spigot on the side of a house, froze my face so

the skin later sloughed like a rubber mask, froze my foot until it click-clacked on the hospital tile like Fred Astaire in tap shoes.

Years and years later, I dream I'm back there, that none of us made it through the blizzard. When I snap awake to the warmth of my bed, I stare at the black window and listen for the roar, because for a few moments it's easier to believe I'm dead.

—Dude, I honked at you on the street the other night. You grinned and slipped into an alley…What's that all about?

My father joined the United States Marine Corps in the latter 1960s. He almost died twice in Vietnam.

First occasion, his platoon was ambushed in a shelled-out village. The enemy opened up with a machine gun. Bullets knocked holes in an old stone wall on either side of him. Several of his fellow soldiers were killed.

Second occasion, the enemy walked mortar rounds onto a camp where my father's company had dug in. Everybody scrambled for a hand-dug bunker under the mess tent as the explosions thudded closer and closer. A round detonated somewhere behind Dad. He sprawled onto his belly as some death god swiped its claws through the tent and a fan of shrapnel left the canvas in tatters. Telling the tale, he always claimed his two tours were the most fun he'd ever had.

Mom got into a nasty argument with Dad and she said he should have stayed in Vietnam if he loved it so much. He laughed and said, *Well, honey, I did.*

Baby, I know you were in California. I'm telling you—I rolled over and saw you smiling at me from the closet. Hell yes, I screamed. Woke my mother. Actually, it wasn't you. Just your head.

Dad was a slave to his moods. He reveled in coarse humor and homespun philosophizing. His anger was a terrible sight, but he remained human, he remained Dad. He lost much of his hearing from the gunfire and explosions during the war. Around age thirteen I came upon him in the woods one day as he cut a trail with his doublebit axe. He hadn't expected me, hadn't expected anyone since we lived in the woods and our nearest neighbors were twenty miles or so down the river. This was late October and the ground had frozen. I scuffed my boot on some ice.

He must have wheeled, although I don't recall him doing so—one second he gazed into a copse of black spruce, and then he faced me, his spine bunched, the axe handle held loosely in both hands, ready to swing. His blue eyes drained to match the gray landscape. He didn't resemble anybody I knew. He wore a cheap human mask—pale and stiff and dead. I used to tell myself that was Dad's war face.

Better believe I watched him after that. Sometimes I spied as he snoozed in the big recliner he referred to as his throne, or when he thought himself alone and unobserved in the backyard. Now and again, I'd see the other guy, the actor who replaced him on certain occasions such as when he and Mom discussed slaughtering an animal or why they'd been stupid enough to go for three kids.

Or maybe it was the other way around.

—Check the dude in the corner. Swear that sonofabitch is the one who ripped me off last winter. Stuck a gun under my chin and took my dope and all my cash. Gotta be, gotta be. Naw, I ain't talkin' to him. Motherfucker is scary. For real, bro. That's him or it's his fucking twin.

People swear they've seen me. I get it often enough, I smile and shrug and say, *Ah, my doppelganger. He intercepts my royalty checks. The bastard!*

Not everybody smiles back. *You don't understand, I* saw *you.* At night on desolate corners; in the branches of a tree, waving to traffic; pale and grinning from the window of a passing bus; smirking behind a rack of

clothes in a closet; in a foxhole in Korea; and countless half-remembered nightmares. I guest star in plenty of those.

My own favorite recurring nightmare goes like this: I trudge along a sidewalk in Seattle's University District. It's dark. Someone is following me. They duck behind a hedge or a mailbox whenever I glance over my shoulder. The sidewalk and the sodium lamps unspool into infinity. Just as I reach to unlock my apartment door, somebody whispers my name and I fly awake. It's my voice.

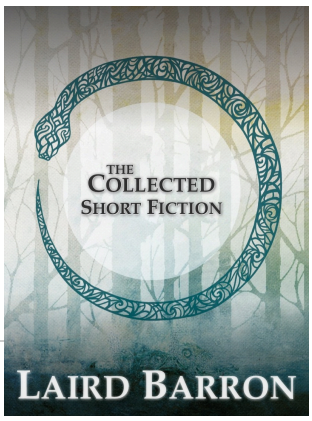
I feel as if I never really knew you.

Sometimes, out of the blue, the old, old dog raises her head and stares at a spot over my shoulder. Her ears will prick up and she'll bare her fangs and emit a low, rumbling growl reserved for danger and situations her doggy mind can't comprehend. Maybe to her, it's the same thing.

Her rheumy eyes reflect my shadow. And sometimes, sometimes, I don't love her with a loyalty borne of shared adventure and hardship. Yeah, in those rare instances, I don't feel anything for her at all. I feel as cold and hollow as the vacuum in the wake of an arctic gale.

Then somebody whispers my name, or I imagine they do, and it passes. I'm myself again.

Of Boys and Two-Headed Dogs



Hellboy: An Assortment of Horrors, August 2017
First published in *Hellboy: An Assortment of Horrors*, August 2017

Maynard Richter awoke from a fever dream of fire and bloody smoke. His dearly departed mother smiled at him as flags blazoned with death's heads and swastikas burned around her. She beckoned as the flames rose and an air raid klaxon blared.

Modo licked Maynard's face and rescued him from the recurring nightmare. The puppy cried, his lumpy features exaggerated with fear. A buzzer sounded in the community hall. Perimeter sensors alerted the Richter clan of impending trouble. Men shouted to one another; Dad's voice was, as ever, loudest.

Maynard left his bunk and limped to the commons. Had the FBI finally decided to raid the compound, as Dad and Grandfather always predicted would happen one dark day? The truth proved stranger. Surveillance cameras revealed an enormous crimson man in a duster. He seemed to be alone with nary a supporting government commando in evidence. Apparently, the red man didn't need backup—he tore a hole through the electrified fence that hemmed the southern edge of the mountain approach. White-hot sparks sizzled and the generator in shack two sputtered and failed.

Dad said, "Well, guess I owe the old man a dollar. Satan's right hand is here." He passed Maynard a rifle. "Loaded some special rounds in there. Now get your boots on."

Twenty men snatched up weapons (shotguns, AK-47s, M-14s, and hunting rifles of all calibers) and fanned out along the heavily wooded ridge. Uncle Ralph and his helpers brought their German shepherds. Meanwhile, the women hunkered in prayer.

From their catbird's seat, Dad's crew watched the enemy blunder forward. How had the man simply walked through a fence crackling with enough voltage to fry flesh from bone? It wasn't natural. Maynard studied his scripture and knew something of angels and devils. What if Dad was right? What if this huge red figure was Satan's minion? Or Satan himself?

The big guy in the duster stepped on one of the many bear traps hidden across the southern edge of the property. He roared and kept coming. An uprooted stump and chain dragged in his wake.

Dad, observing through a Redfield scope, said, "Sweet Jesus. Son, take the shot."

That's Satan. I'm shooting the devil. Ice filled Maynard's chest. His teeth chattered. *I can't shoot the devil—*

"Boy, do it!"

Hundreds of hours of target practice with Dad barking in his ear did the trick. Maynard pulled the trigger from pure Pavlovian reflex. He'd gotten so feeble, the recoil almost knocked him down. One hundred yards downhill, the big guy staggered. Then Dad and Uncle Ralph fired their own rifles and the trespasser dropped in his tracks. They sent the dogs in to make sure, but the dogs circled the corpse and whined and wouldn't go any closer. These were man eaters. Uncle Ralph kept them hungry and mean. "Wall dogs," he called them, in honor of the brutes tethered along the Berlin Wall all those years ago.

Dad cussed as he reloaded. He and Ralph eventually crept down and surveyed their work firsthand. Maynard knew what a Winchester Model 70 did—a man could stick his head in the exit hole. He didn't have the stomach for it. The boy didn't have the stomach for much of anything, lately. His guts stabbed with pain and wouldn't tolerate food half the time. The Richter clan didn't place a lick of faith in hospitals—anything short of a severed limb, a man was expected to grit it out. Drained and reeling, he leaned against a tree and closed his eyes.

Red smoke, red hellfire. His mother turned her back.

Two dozen families inhabited the compound; nonetheless, they collectively referred to themselves as the Richter family. A select group of staunch Richter men settled on the Mountain (Granddad's name for their bolthole paradise) during the 1960s. Granddad and his brothers bought land for miles at the end of a defunct logging road. They built cabins and dug a bunker. Ran moonshine and guns. Later, somebody got the bright idea to grow weed, although Granddad drew the line in the dirt there—no way would the Richters get so low as to cook meth like the Sonders up to Tadson Creek, or the Willingham boys over the Mountain. The old man reckoned moonshine, weed, guns, and dogfights would keep body and soul together. Law enforcement categorized them as a white separatist militia. That suited the Richter clan. As the years rolled by, like-minded souls flocked from around the country and gathered beneath the Richter banner.

Dad brought his wife and son to the Mountain shortly after Maynard's sixth birthday. Mom hated the compound and what its culture represented. Her family believed in love, peace, and progress. Gentle folk. Dad sneered the phrase like a curse. *Gentle folk.* Mom swallowed her antipathy and tried to honor the Richter traditions; she dutifully listened to Granddad's lectures about the evils of big government, illegal aliens swarming God's country, the filth of miscegenation, and how a day of reckoning would fall upon the faithless and the corrupt like a hard rain.

She helped the other women cook meals and mend clothes and tend the children. Prior to the Mountain, she'd taught third grade at an elementary school near New York City. Grandfather didn't permit government textbooks within the compound. He acquired proper Christian materials from an obscure source. Under Granddad's stony supervision, Mom instructed the children in letters, numbers, and the Word of Almighty God. Rather than a convert, she considered herself a missionary or a fifth columnist working to effect change from the inside.

Mom lasted two years before she said goodbye to Dad and departed with Maynard back to New York. Dad called her a faithless whore, a dyed-in-the-wool Jezebel. He didn't stand in her way, though. He just laughed and said to mail him the divorce decree—he could always use kindling paper. Let her flee to New York. Let her flee to China, if she wanted; in the eyes of the Lord, she'd belong to Dad forever.

Two summers ago, Mom died in a car wreck. Back to the compound for a hero's welcome Maynard went. Dad crushed him in a hug that smelled of gun oil, sweat, and dog piss. *Now you're free, son!*

The boy didn't know how to react, so he accepted the situation. Mom had called him a people pleaser, and that's exactly what he did. It wasn't easy, despite his best efforts. Granddad and Dad were taskmasters and held Maynard in contempt for a soft upbringing. They were extra hard on him, for his own good, naturally. The boys his age took their cues from the adults, and a few of the bigger, stronger ones kept his eye blacked and his nose bloodied. Lately, he'd become so perpetually ill, his foes showed scornful pity and avoided him entirely.

Maynard found solace in his only friend, a castoff puppy.

Modo was barely four months old. Nobody knew who'd sired him. Occasionally Uncle Ralph's prized dogs escaped the kennel and ran off on an adventure. Stray mongrels prowled the hills, feral as wolves, and the wandering female shepherds like as not slunk home pregnant. Modo's markings were of a mutt.

The pup (sole survivor of the litter and rejected by his mother at birth) suffered from a defect—his scrawny neck barely supported an enormous skull and he listed like a drunken sailor. Richter family tradition dictated imperfect animals must be culled without mercy. Maynard, in a rare moment of defiance, claimed the pup as his personal responsibility. He'd recently turned fourteen and gained his majority, so choosing to adopt Modo was his right. Dad had lowered the killing hammer in bemusement. He finally chuckled and said the boy would learn a valuable lesson from his foolishness. *This one wanted to be a Siamese twin. Almost had yourself a two-headed dog. You can see where he absorbed his brother. He's a freak of nature. Don't come crying to me when he gets sick and dies.* Dad went on to suggest Quasimodo as a righteously appropriate name. Maynard, afraid to press his luck any further, shortened it to Modo.

Poor Modo, with his misshapen skull, hunched spine, and a mug only a lonely, desperate boy could love, might not have been worth a tinker's damn, but Maynard cherished him unreservedly—and the pup felt the same, inseparable as a shadow.

Maynard was slumped in a chair, holding his dog, when Dad came and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Not a bad shot, boy. You look like spoiled milk. Is your liver really that tender?" Dad didn't accept that Maynard might be ill. Despite the fact this had gone on for several months, he put his son's pallid flesh and stomach pains down to an affliction of the spirit. The ghosts of his mother and her love of city life gripped his very soul. More fresh air and more meditation upon the Bible would lead to Maynard's salvation. Until he let go of his old life, he'd suffer, sure as God caused the sun to rise and set.

"My stomach hurts." Maynard bit back the pain. He didn't want to sound as if he were whining.

"On your feet. Grandfather wants a word."

The dread of an encounter with Granddad momentarily banished Maynard's exhaustion and the spikes of agony in his middle. He and Modo trudged along after Dad to Bunker C, a fair hike from the main compound. Bunker C served mainly as storage. Today, a pair of Granddad's bully boys stood sentry. Neither appeared too pleased. Dad glared and the men squared their shoulders and stared straight ahead into the woods.

A string of electric bulbs lighted the way into deep murk. Granddad awaited them at the rear of the bunker near a sealed vault. He resembled a leather sack stuffed with bones. Most inhabitants of the Mountain loved and feared him in equal measure. While literature beyond the Bible and a handful of how-to manuals was forbidden, his own reading habits encompassed a variety of texts, philosophical and occult alike. He frequently spoke to his confidants (Dad, Uncle Ralph, and a couple other old-timers) on the subject of witchcraft, demonology, and occultism as practiced during the heyday of the Third Reich. He'd told Dad that the reason the Richters chose this territory had less to do with remoteness and defensibility and more with the fact it bordered on a nexus of otherworldly forces.

Among Granddad's favorite screeds: *A Christian crusader should not fear to dwell in the shadow of Damnation. The End Times are nigh, brothers and sisters! We shall summon light from the darkness to smite our enemies, to destroy the unmakers, and purge our glorious homeland of corruption!*

“Lo! The worm turns!” Granddad pinched Maynard’s cheek and grinned at the irony. “A headshot, no less.”

“He’s racked with guilt,” Dad said. “His mother’s heart in that pigeon chest.”

“Ah, the demon isn’t dead. Satan’s kin aren’t so easily dispatched, enchanted bullets notwithstanding. Show him.”

Dad swung open the heavy steel door. Inside, the big red man dangled from a snake’s nest of logging chains bolted into the ceiling. The man wore nothing except pants. Bloodied and bruised, his barrel chest rose and fell. Occasionally, he muttered groggily and twitched against his bonds. His black hooves grazed the floor.

Modo whined and pressed against the boy’s leg. Maynard stared at the prisoner’s sawed-off horns, sinuous tail, and huge stony right hand. “Is he . . . the devil?”

“Nay, it’s merely hell spawn,” Granddad said. “I’ve *seen* Lucifer.”

“What are we going to do with him . . . it?” Maynard couldn’t shake the notion they were pondering the fate of a *man*, regardless of his own misgivings and Granddad’s assertions to the contrary.

“Taking an interest, eh? We’ll bleed the fiend dry. Demon blood is potent, oh, yes. Grind its bones to powder. First though, it will tell me the secrets of the pylon on Gallant’s Peak.”

Gallant’s Peak lay along a deer track several miles north of the compound. Maynard had seen the pylon twice. Once up close—fifteen feet tall, gray as a dead tooth, and covered in caveman writing partly washed away by the elements. It reared from a shelf of rock overlooking a gorge. Second time he saw it was at a healthy distance by the dark of the moon. Granddad lighted a small campfire and prayed to the pylon while glimmering orange light made his shadow a monstrous thing. Maynard hadn’t been able to hear his exact words, only snatches of Latin carried on the quickening breeze. The tone frightened him anyhow. Echoes never sounded quite human.

“Think it came down from the peak?” Dad said.

Granddad glanced toward an array of Caterpillar D9 batteries, an acetylene tank, a torch, and jumper cables. Ye olde Richter “articles of persuasion.”

Holdovers from an era when the lesser races knew their place or could be put back in it right smartly. “If you’re hinting that I summoned this creature, no. We’ll put it to the question. Cut and burn zealously enough, Satan Hisownself will answer true.”

“Amen,” Dad said.

“Ya got it wrong, Herr Richter. I’m no *mere* creature—I’m Hellboy.” The red man spoke in a rumble. His eyes opened to slits, hot as furnace glass. “You’re the one who’s going to answer a few questions.” The chains groaned as he tested them by flexing his torso. He fixed his gaze on Maynard. “Kid, ya better scram. This ain’t gonna be pretty.”

Dad drew his pistol and swiped it across the prisoner’s jaw. “Silence, demon!”

Hellboy yanked his left arm down and that chain sheared free of its mooring and smashed Dad flat. The horrible gonging reverberated through the steel floor. Granddad shrieked curses in Latin and German. He gestured like a magician incanting a spell.

Maynard made a split-second calculation. Either this red demon guy would destroy Granddad as he promised, or Granddad and the militia would rally to defeat the brute. Death or another day in purgatory? Neither appealed. He scooped up his puppy and ran for the hills.

World War III (or, at least, the Civil War Part II) erupted below as the boy climbed, Modo clutched tight against his chest. He’d chosen his ascent instinctively—downhill lay militia guards and a long swath of electrified fence. Eventually the thunder of gunfire became sporadic thumps and booms and then faded. Night came and, with it, heavy rain and utter darkness. Maynard lurched through the woods. Rain and mud soaked his clothes and chilled him. He pushed onward. His head swam with feverish delusions and his lungs burned. He pushed onward. He tripped countless times and rose again, and pushed onward. Onward until pain and weakness overcame his determination.

When his legs folded for the final time, he dragged himself and Modo beneath the lee of a rotten log and instantly lost consciousness. Boy and dog shivered uncontrollably, each pursued into the depths of their nightmares by red demons and cackling old men.

Dawn light seeped through the misty undergrowth. Maynard tried to move, but his limbs were made of lead. He groaned and submerged again into delirium. Before succumbing to oblivion, he slid the puppy under his shirt. “I’m sorry, dog,” he muttered. The puppy burrowed in and fell asleep.

You’re coming home, Mother said. She stood silhouetted in a spectral doorway, her hand extended, beckoning. Crimson light pulsed around her figure.

I’m dying. Maynard realized this had been true for many weeks. *I’m dying of cancer.* Mom had explained the disease to him—it had felled her own mother and an older brother.

At last, in the realm of a fever dream, he’d gained the courage to name his affliction and accept his fate. Soon, he’d pass through the doorway to where his mother awaited, whatever that portended for his everlasting soul.

Aw, damn it, kid,” Hellboy said upon finding them after thirty-six hours of hunting through the underbrush. He wrapped the ashen and unresponsive boy in his coat and dribbled water from a canteen between the child’s lips. The puppy licked Hellboy’s fingers. The next order of business was to build a fire.

After a while, the warmth caused Maynard to stir. He stared, clear eyed and fatalistically calm. “Were you sent to punish us?”

“Nah, kid. I came to stop Richter and his cronies. They were messing around with powers not meant for mortals. Especially not meant for neo-Nazi bastards.” Hellboy read the expression on the boy’s face. “Don’t worry, I didn’t massacre the joint. The rest of your friends scattered to the winds.”

“I apologize for shooting you.” It obviously took great effort for the boy to speak and his words were scarcely more than a whisper.

“It’s okay. Whatever Richter did to those bullets, they stung.”

“Take care . . . of my dog. His name is Modo.”

“Actually, I’ve been looking for the dog,” Hellboy said. “He’s special.”

Maynard didn’t answer. He was gone.

Hellboy grimly piled stones into a makeshift cairn. He hated to leave the boy, even temporarily, but this would keep the animals away until he

finished his business on the mountain. The BPRD would be on scene at the compound, cleaning up the mess. In a few hours, he'd rendezvous with the team and turn the boy over for a proper burial. First, however, he had an urgent mission to accomplish.

Modo cowered next to the cairn. He howled miserably as Hellboy tucked him under his arm and strode into the woods. "Don't worry, pup. I won't abandon either one of you out here."

A certain deer trail wound ever higher, until the trees grew small and sparse. The pylon of Gallant's Peak awaited on its promontory above a gulf of misty old-growth canopy. Mortal reality thinned here and the ancient altar acted as a kind of gateway. Otherworldly entities could easily slip through this fault, even when the gate lay inactive. Should an amateur sorcerer, such as the late Ernst Richter, devise a key to activating its power . . . Well, such concerns would soon be moot.

Hellboy pressed the Right Hand of Doom against the pylon. He concentrated until a nearby cliff face cracked open and tunneled toward what seemed to be a fiery cavern at the heart of the mountain. He patted Modo and set the pup down at the threshold.

"This world ain't for you," Hellboy said as the pup hesitated. "Go say hi to your pop." In the distance, an enormous silhouette formed among lava and geysers of flame. Perhaps a giant wolf, or an ur-canine—the conflagration made it impossible to know. A welcoming howl boomed along the tunnel, and multiplied.

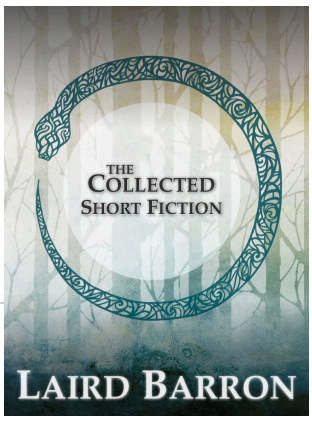
Modo's ears pricked. He stumbled forward, enraptured by the call of a sovereign. As the pup went, his back straightened with an audible crack and his stringy frame grew dense with muscle. Black and red fur shone with unearthly luster. His neck thickened and his skull split bloodlessly as a second head emerged. He glanced over his shoulder, majestic and terrible, two sets of eyes aglow with the fires of hell, tongues lolling across fangs as long and sharp as knives. His shambling gait smoothed. He trotted into the furnace and its flames closed behind him like a curtain. The portal closed and left a slab of soot-smeared rock.

All had been set right, for the moment.

Hellboy destroyed the pylon with several crushing blows from the Hand of Doom and cast the larger chunks into the gorge. Then he lit a cigarette and smoked with melancholy satisfaction. It seldom paid to dwell on misery. He shook himself to dispel the glumness. He whistled “Two-Headed Dog,” and started down the mountain toward whatever sorrows and calamities the world had in store.

Swift To Chase

This version taken from *Adam's Ladder*, September 2017
First published in *Adam's Ladder*, September 2017



In medias res part II:

After a hard chase and all-too brief struggle, the Bird Woman of the Adirondacks loomed over me; demonic silhouette, blackest outspread wings tipped in iron; gore-crested and flint-beaked. Her thumbnail-talon poised to spike me through the left eye.

"To know itself, the universe must drink the blood of its children." Her voice cracked like an ice shelf collapsing; it roared across an improbable expanse of inches.

The talon pressed against my iris. It went in and in.

Rewind and power dive from the clouds. Join the story, *in medias res, part I:*

Where in the world is Jessica Mace? That scene when the superlative secret agent gets captured inside the master villain's lair is where. Instead of a secret agent, here's little old me doing my best impression. Rather than a rocket station beneath a dormant volcano, I'd gotten trapped on an estate (1960s Philip K. Dick-esque) nestled among the peaks of the Adirondacks. Cue jazzy intro music; cue rhinestone heels and a dress slit to *here*. My nemesis, billionaire avian enthusiast and casual murderer of humans, Averna Spencer, wasn't playing. Except she *was* playing.

First clue of my imminent demise (more like the fifth or sixth clue, but just go with it): a leather-bound copy of *The Most Dangerous Game* parked on the nightstand of my quarters. Second clue? The woman herself said over the intercom, "Fly, my swift, my sweet. When I catch you, I'm giving you a blood eagle."

Viking history isn’t my specialty, but I know enough to not want one.

There I sat, dressed to kill or be killed. The loaner evening gown was a trap. Spencer had set it when she laid the fancy box across the sheets of the poster bed, and I sprang it as I slipped the dress on. Bird-of-paradise-crimson, gilded with streaks of gold and blue, a bronze torc to cover the scar on my neck (so thoughtful of my hostess), and four-inch rhinestone heels amounted to a costume worth more than I’d make in a lifetime unless that lifetime included a winning lotto ticket or sucking millionaire cock on the daily.

The ensemble transcended mere decoration; it reorganized my cells and worked outward like magma rushing through igneous channels. I’d stared at myself in the mirror and come face to face with a starlet. A tad hard-bitten. Close, though. Action heroine on the precipice of unfuckability by Hollywood’s standard. Regardless, the illusion of fabulous me radiated heat—live-wire alive.

Yep, slipping into the dress had been to stick my head right through a dangling snare. Call it the price of admission. Too late to change a damned thing that was coming. I grinned like a prizefighter to keep my gorge down. I’d been here before and survived. Double-edged blade, the notion of past as prologue, and so forth. Resilience in prey excited Averna and made her want me that much more.

A girl on the run in a dress and high heels wouldn’t run far is what Spencer bet, and why not? She owned the house. The house always wins.

The isolated mountain house of a high-toned serial killer isn’t the kind of joint you accidentally wander into. I’d been recruited, seduced, and deployed. Dr. Ryoko and Dr. Campbell (more on my patrons—and their sexy, sexy bodyguard, Beasley—in due course), possessed a special interest in Averna Spencer’s activities. My mission was to infiltrate her estate and conduct hostile actions on their behalf.

A few words about our mutual foe:

Averna craved the chase. She wasn’t a slasher of (hapless) womenfolk or a sniper of unsuspecting coyotes. She didn’t howl at the moon; hadn’t been

born under a bad sign or suffered childhood trauma. A hunter, nonetheless. Pure predator evolved to the job at hand. Sixty-three kills, if the cobbled-together records told it true. Sixty-three on U.S. soil; only INTERPOL could speak for the body count in Europe where she frequently traveled.

The manifest of persons missing and presumed dead since 1988, included loggers, hikers, ex-military, a baker's dozen hardened criminals, and a former Olympic decathlete. These folks vanished across the U.S.; law enforcement records established the deeds, but the authorities hadn't officially put it together. Unofficially, there were rumors. A retired FBI agent in Houston, a discredited private investigator in Wisconsin, and other assorted kooks, rocked the boat now and again. It came to nothing, as these situations usually do.

The track and field star haunted me. Strapping lad. Last known photograph taken at sunset, ice cream cone in hand (an athlete's notion of decadence), a tall, dark-haired chick hanging on his arm. Track and field dude—let's call him Rocky since he looked a hell of a lot like a Rocky I knew in high school—dressed nicely, smiled nicely. Only missed snagging the bronze medal by hundredths of a second. I imagined how he must've been later, after the kidnapping—alone, lost in a trackless forest. Pressed flat against the trunk of a pine, head cocked, every cord in his neck straining. Then, *slice*.

Rocky the Olympian's tragic story ended the same as the rest. Worm food.

Fast, strong, tough. Hadn't mattered, had it? Can't fight what you don't see coming, can't fight if you're prey. Dharma 101, friends and neighbors. The rabbit runs and the hawk dives.

Where do I fit into the grand scheme? I muck around in the rising tide of cosmic night. I'm hell on wheels. My totem animal is the coyote, the mongoose, my blazon a bloodied Ka-Bar in a clenched fist against a field of black.

Lest I join the dearly departed in their unmarked graves, the moment had come to make myself scarce. The original extraction plan struck me as sketchy at best—on the bright side of the equation, Spencer's houseguests

normally returned to the world unharmed. The data led Campbell and Ryoko to theorize that those whom she kidnapped (and I qualified) were subsequently hunted across her estate grounds. Should the operation go pear-shaped, I was to flee Averna Spencer's home and rendezvous at a hunting cabin a mile past the estate's southeast boundary. My patrons had assured me they'd done the math forward and back—it wouldn't come to such an extreme. Bastards.

A grand staircase spiraled down into gothic gloom. Marble raptors guarded the way. I ripped the dress to upper thigh, removed my heels, and transformed into a new creature; slippery and dangerous.

I hustled through the door and past a phalanx of artificial eggs arranged on the front lawn. Almost did a doubletake. The eggs were outsized and exaggerated, Andy Warhol style; waist-tall, maybe three feet in circumference, cast from milky-lucent porcelain that glowed in the porchlight. The one nearest my left was bisected at its apex, like a hollow rocket missing its conical nose. An egg and a coffin are antipodes of a closed circuit. Made it halfway across the yard before Averna's evil sidekick, Manson, shot me in the ass with a dart from a rifle. She waved when I glanced back. I flipped her the bird (ironic to the bitter end). Strength drained from me like blood from a tapped artery. Five more steps and I sprawled.

Averna rolled me onto my side. She moved her lips against mine in a not-quite kiss. Would've punched her in the throat except whatever Manson had loaded the dart with froze every muscle in my body. I tabled the impulse. She licked the salt of my tears and leaned back to regard me from the shadows. Eyes without a face. Yellow eyes with strange-as-shit pupils. Hawk pupils. I wanted to ask how she'd *known*. Maybe she didn't; and if she didn't, despite her rhetoric, I might escape with my skin.

This feeble hope persisted for less than five seconds.

"The doctors asked you to acquire a certain document, yes? They promised some grand reward for your service; appealed to your sense of honor. Couldn't you detect the evil in their black little hearts? Did you not whiff the deception?"

Had I been capable of speech, I'd have said nobody's perfect, and spat a gob in her eye.

She smiled. "I delivered the formula to them months ago. Payment for your sweet self. I got the best of Campbell and Ryoko, as usual. The formula is worthless, lacking a specific strain of Jurassic protozoa, which, let us pray, no one ever resurrects. Blink if you can hear me."

I'm stubborn, so I glared, bug-eyed defiant. Impossible to tell if she was lying, and if so, how much. My "power" to behold the evil in the human heart doesn't work on women half as well as it does on men, and if she was telling the truth, it didn't work half so well on men as I'd thought.

A sociopath will say anything to make her victims squirm, which meant I dared not believe a word from her lips. Yet, and yet . . . I tried to speak; to scream, actually. Had my preparation and training been a ruse? Had those kindly eggheads really double-crossed me? Had their man-at-arms (and my lover) Beasley, participated in the con? *Et tu*, Beasley? *Et tu*, you handsome sonofabitch?

Averna said, "None of this is an accident. The doctors do not trade in coincidence and neither do I. We've observed you for many years. Something happened to your mother as a young woman. She met a friend of mine, a foreigner, you might say, who contracted with the CIA to enhance various programs. Lucius was part of an experiment, alongside many of her friends. She and the other surviving test subjects have been remotely monitored since the latter 1970s, as are their offspring. The . . . conditions that altered Lucius skipped her firstborn, Elwood, and bloomed within you. Curses can be finicky.

"Did those old goats suggest they knew Lucius's fate? Spoiler alert: mother dearest isn't living in a trailer in Tennessee with a failed country singer. She didn't drink herself to death or get eaten by a bear. I am not privy to the machinations of Campbell and Ryoko. I *do* have my own brand of intuition. My intuition says they murdered Lucius Lochinvar Mace. Did her in in the name of science." She rose and gestured to Manson who lurked nearby.

Manson hoisted me with her arms extended as if I were a crash test dummy. My field of view revolved off its y axis. I went bye-bye into the hollow belly of night.

Backtrack, backtrack. Maybe you're wondering how a nice girl like me ended up in a place like this . . .

A pair of infamous scientists figured I might be game to solve a mystery and save the world. Unlikely, yet no less so than the rest of the improbable bullshit that increasingly defines my existence. My current boyfriend, the aforementioned Beasley, happened to serve as bodyguard, valet, and moral compass to the renegade doctors. He introduced us. This set the ball rolling. Happy (unhappy) coincidence? As I've come to mutter on a routine basis, there are no accidents.

Most people born prior to 1980 have at least heard of the inseparable duo, Toshi Ryoko and Howard Campbell (erstwhile academic favorites of every male-oriented pop magazine in existence). Renowned for death-defying expeditions, gauche stunts, and outré theories in their heyday; less celebrated of late. The naturalists retired (voluntarily mothballed, as Beasley put it) to a quaintly decrepit New England farm. Ryoko in his wheelchair, Campbell stooped to push. The inseparable duo as drawn by some virtuoso graphic artist; say Mike Mignola or Patch Zircher.

Prior to our first meeting, I did my homework and read the news stories (which traced back into the early '80s), watched myriad videos, and listened to radio programs devoted to their exploits (the *public* exploits; turns out the pair really and truly deserved the "mad scientist" appellation). Iconoclasts and apostates to the hilt. Neither man would go quietly to a nursing home. These two were fated for an exotic demise: they'd vanish in the Bermuda Triangle, or into the Amazon rainforest and leave behind a ravaged campsite, cryptic research notes scattered, a cursed Neolithic medallion dangling from a bush; or, an unmarked government van would whisk them to a black site for a final debriefing.

We got along swimmingly. Didn't mean I'd be a cheerful pawn in their schemes.

"The Shadow of Death slides across the floor," Dr. Campbell said, and nodded at his shoe in a sliver of sunlight.

“The Shadow of Death!” Dr. Ryoko struggled to light a cigarette. His palsy tremors came and went.

“Soon it will crawl onto us and dig in the spurs. Time yet . . . ”

“ . . . a few years yet. We can do some good.”

“*You* can do some good, Jessica. Help us hold back the darkness.”

What they wanted wasn’t difficult. Hazardous to my health, yes, but not difficult. Some rich lady possessed a formula; a cure for a deadly strain of avian flu, or a recipe to weaponize the virus, nobody could be sure which. Campbell handed me an envelope full of notes and photographs and that’s how I came to acquaint myself with the legend of Averna Spencer—AKA the Bird Lady of the Adirondacks, AKA (my addition) the Cuckoo Killer. She’d briefly made a public splash on nightly news programs when they profiled her participation in the emergent wingsuit craze during the late 1990s. As one of the few women rich enough and ballsy enough to leap off cliffs and sail like a flying squirrel, she’d represented a curiosity.

Averna kicked it old school, pre-Information Age—nothing left to chance in a computer database, otherwise Ryoko and Campbell would’ve enlisted a hacker and done the job by remote. She kept the formula locked in a safe at her residence; a cliff-side mansion-slash-fortified stronghold amid thousands of acres of wilderness. The aforementioned master villain’s lair. Called it the Aerie.

The broad owned more land than Ted Turner in his Montana heyday with Jane Fonda and the Atlanta Braves. Closest road lay twenty miles southeast. Traffic came and went via a helicopter pad. Power derived from generators, turbines, and solar panels. Security? Ex-military goons provided by Black Dog; armed drones; bloodhounds and German shepherds. Land mines. The wilderness and its many teeth waited for scraps.

How did the doctors score this information? Dr. Ryoko claimed a contact on the inside. A spy in the house of love. While this shadowy individual didn’t possess direct access to the formula, the person had provided a detailed description of the item and the combination to the safe where it currently resided.

My natural skepticism asserted itself. Setting aside reservations regarding the veracity of the alleged spy, why in the hell would Averna Spencer, noted

recluse, grant me an audience?

"Never fear, we'll arrange it," Dr. Ryoko said. "You are the mistress of inevitability. The opener of the way. Occult forces magnetize to you."

"Spencer delights in taking things apart. Unbreakable individuals are her weakness." Dr. Campbell actually rubbed his hands when he said this.

"Oh, goodie," I said.

"If she isn't familiar with your résumé as a survivor of massacres and slayer of maniacs, we'll enlighten her. She won't be able to resist. You're a blue-ribbon prize."

"Nice as that sounds, I'd prefer to live a while yet."

Ryoko said, "The universe built you to destroy human predators as it built the mongoose to destroy serpents."

"Dang, as a little girl I adored Kipling's tales to the max."

I inquired at length as to what they meant by occult forces and got nowhere fast. Slick as politicians dodging press questions, they relentlessly pivoted to the matter of Averna Spencer and her formula.

Charisma, resourcefulness, and grit notwithstanding, *Mission Impossible* wasn't my bag. The doctors hung in there with the hard sell. Dr. Campbell said I owed it to the missing persons and their distraught families. Dr. Ryoko insisted I bore a patriotic duty to obtain the formula from Spencer. Heaven help us if the avian flu developed into a more lethal strain.

This dragged on.

"What's your decision?" Dr. Campbell tried on a hopeful, earnest smile. "Will you help us avert a global catastrophe?"

"Pass."

"You're a born meddler," Dr. Ryoko said. "Consider the stakes—mass extinction of multiple species…"

"Not for all the chickens in the world." I actually meant, sweeten the pot, you cheap sonsofbitches. They sweetened the pot.

Dr. Campbell said, "Twenty-thousand. Cash. Our entire rainy-day fund."

"Tempting, but no thanks."

The doctors exchanged a glance I'll take to my grave.

"We'll tell you what really happened to your mother," Dr. Ryoko said.

Ding-ding-ding. Winner.

The Aughts exacted a hell of a toll on the Mace family. It felt personal between us and the universe.

Mom took a permanent vacation to parts unknown.

My brother, Elwood, stepped on a landmine. Elwood was "technically" the eldest of my fellow brood—he'd plopped onto the hospital sheets about forty-five minutes before me back in 1980. We didn't share the Corsican Twins psychic bond as romanticized by pop lit. Elwood and I had barely acknowledged, much less dwelled on, the fact we were twins. I was shocked as anyone to get the bad news from Afghanistan.

Jackson Bane, love of my life, went down with his fishing boat.

Dad followed suit in a separate accident on the Bering.

A bunch of friends and colleagues got murdered by the Eagle Talon Ripper. The Ripper almost did me in as well, hence the scar on my neck. Melodrama galore.

Hindsight: Mom's final disappearance began the unholy countdown sequence. Unlike the many other instances where Lucius slapped Dad and hit the road for a week or a month, she didn't return. Didn't call, didn't write, didn't leave a hint where she'd gone and after a couple of years, her fate gradually became the stuff of legends.

Flash forward the better part of a decade. When the mad doctors offered to solve the nagging mystery of Mom's vanishing act, my instincts were to skip the whole middle part where I went off on a fool's errand into the den of a sadistic murderer. Quicker and more reliable to extract their information with a sharp stick.

Beasley presented a major obstacle. He watched over Campbell and Ryoko with zeal. The adorable brute exhibited a ruthless streak when it came to protecting the codgers. His bulging biceps and handiness with gun, knife, and hobnail boot, gave me pause.

It’s seldom wise to tackle an irresistible force of nature head-on. I played it coy.

He implored me to forget the mission and slip away into the night. No amount of money was worth the risk, he adored me, et cetera. I informed him the old bastards had made me an offer I couldn’t refuse—and then refused to tell him what the offer entailed. I asked if he’d ever met a woman named Lucius, real slick like. He shrugged and said yeah, she’d blown into camp a few years back, consulted with the doctors, then departed on an evening breeze.

Innocent, and I’m a decent judge of a man’s soul if I gaze into his eyes long enough after a good hard screw. On the subject of screwing: I didn’t have the heart to ask if he’d banged my mom.

“Spencer is a monster,” he said as we smoked cigarettes in bed and slugged from a bottle of vodka. “She’s protected by the powers of darkness. I’ve seen the file. I’ve seen all their files . . . ”

“Who else are your bosses spying on?”

“Don’t ask questions you’ll come to regret. You’re not a professional. The docs aren’t either. Meanwhile, Spencer is queen of her little mountain fiefdom. Absolutely untouchable. The FBI knows. The Department of Defense knows. Everybody.”

“The government is aware that she’s a serial killer?” I feigned shock. Experience had taught me that we primates were capable of anything, everything. There ain’t no good guys.

“Always room for one more creep on the payroll. Uncle Sam wouldn’t give a shit if Spencer had Joseph Mengele’s brain implanted. As long as she keeps her activities on the property and doesn’t kill anyone important, she’s golden.”

“Golden,” I said. “Reminds me of something . . . ”

I loved Beasley, after a fashion. It isn’t unusual, as Tom Jones might say. Big, sorta-handsome (he looked like a soap star who got smashed in the face with a shovel), mean guys rev my motor, and the Bease had it going on in spades. He loved me back, far as I could tell. Our mutual affection complicated matters; made what I had to do to get close to Averna a

dilemma of scruples versus pragmatism. My scruples aren't what they used to be.

"Since I can't change your mind, I can show you what you've signed on for." He plugged in a laptop and ran three video clips. Surveillance or home footage as shot by an anonymous someone with Ingmar Bergman's ice-cold aesthetic.

Clip one, black and white: *a man sprints along a seaside cliff toward the camera. The fuzzy shape of an enormous bird sweeps through the frame and plucks him in its claws. The man struggles as the bird cruises toward the horizon. They shrink to a distant blot—the smaller blot separates and plummets into the ocean.*

Clip two: *an actress clad in an elaborate costume (skintight suit pricked with gemstones; a demented mask with a red and yellow feather plume, a vicious iron beak, underarm webbing, and steely talons) glides the length of a vast solarium. She rebounds from the walls to alter course with horrible grace. Naked men and women scatter beneath her. Every pass, the performer decapitates a victim with the swipe of a talon or the slash of a spur. Viscera streams in her wake.*

I know from Wire-Fu. I can't find the wires.

Clip three: *Averna Spencer stands near a bonfire with her arms spread. An assistant (the woman in the photo with Rocky the Olympian) fits her into a wingsuit designed by Satan. Spencer's arms are harnessed to actual wings designed after some gigantic specimen—twenty feet, tip to tip. The feathers ripple, hinting at a spectrum dulled by the black and white film. The fire illuminates queerly-hooked calf-high boots, steel (titanium?) talons strapped to her wrists, metallic panels across her breast, and a bronze helm crafted in the likeness of the god or devil of all avian-kind. Beneath the cruel beak, she grins.*

I stared overlong, evidently.

Beasley apologized, mistaking silence for dismay. Truthfully? The images had stolen my breath. A close race between disgust and awe. That's how much I'd evolved since Alaska. He figured I would react as any normal, rational person and tell the doctors to stuff their espionage mission. Quite the contrary.

Averna Spencer seldom emerged from her mountain fortress. She traveled in rarified company under various aliases and in disguise. Tracking her movements abroad proved a no-go. Campbell and Ryoko approached the finest detective agencies and were rebuffed without explanation. Beasley wasn't kidding when he said Spencer enjoyed protection from on high. Somebody ran major interference on her behalf, and I suspect that baloney had a first name, spelled CIA, and a second name spelled NSA, and a last name starting with Homeland Security. Spread enough money around and the baddest intelligence agency will act as your very own private concierge.

Since flushing out our quarry didn't seem a viable option, we needed to attract her interest. Birds appreciate shiny objects. The doctors devised a plan that involved getting me onto the guest list for an exclusive seminar featuring a famed ornithologist rumored to be an on and off again flame of Ms. Spencer. The doctors pulled strings and away I went to make the magic happen.

The lecture occurred in Kingston, New York at the home of a wealthy naturalist who reveled in this kind of groovy shit. Real nice place, if a tad stuffy. Kind of a museum, although the owner rarely opened for tours; he collected documents, weapons (a veritable shit-ton of knives), landscape paintings, and animal artifacts for his sole viewing pleasure. I've met a few guys with that particular pathology; the type who stored priceless art in bank vaults. Creepy bastards, the lot of them.

The ornithologist (Henry-something or other), on the other hand, seemed normal enough for a whack-a-doodle birdwatcher. We hit it off after I revealed my secret identity as a retired biologist. Dude gave his talk to a parlor-load of eminently bored stuffed shirts, then took my elbow and introduced me around. Scotch started flowing and I made tons of new friends.

One of these friends shook my hand and said to call her Manson. Manson stood tall and Amazonian in combat boots. She wore a bomber jacket (unzipped to flash DETROIT in block type across a stretched-tight T-shirt) and makeup fit to front The Cure. Cropped hair, heavy eyeliner, cherry-black lipstick, cherry-black nails. Yeah, I'd read her file too—born and

raised in the Motor City, ex-con, worked as muscle for hire until Averna Spencer rescued her from the mean streets. I recognized Manson as the mystery girl in the last photo of Rocky, Mr. Decathlete, and in the video of her girding Spencer for mayhem. Guess that made her Oddjob to Spencer's Goldfinger, or Renfield to Dracula.

We adjourned to the veranda, admiring an autumnal blaze in the eye of the sunset. Manson reminded me of a female iteration of Beasley—big, tough, ruggedly attractive, and not overly gifted in chitchat. Manson came right to the point. She explained that her mega-rich, mega-private employer desired my presence at her estate for dinner and light conversation. The mysterious employer approved of my various exploits (especially the way I'd dispatched the Eagle Talon Ripper in Alaska). Should I be so gracious as to accept the invitation, my forbearance would be well-compensated. A helicopter waited nearby. No need to pack; my every need would be fulfilled.

Damn, the forces of darkness moved in fast. Manson's Plan B probably involved a rag and chloroform, so rather than play hard to get, I acted tipsy and said, hell yeah, take me to your leader. What girl turns down a ride in a private helicopter? Not this girl! Manson ran a wand over my body from stem to stern and patted me down with more intimacy than a zealous airport security agent. Smart call, leaving my knives at home.

The helicopter carried us north for the better part of an hour.

Our pilot wore a snow-white uniform. His (or her) visor concealed his (or her) identity. I thought of Jonathan Harker's carriage-ride, Dracula at the reins, hell-bent for leather on the way to the castle. Dracula possessed a cold grip and the strength of twenty men. How strong was Averna Spencer's grip?

The answer—firm. That old saying about a velvet glove and an iron fist applies here. A few minutes after we touched down (and nope, I never saw her and the pilot together), the lady herself greeted me near the front lawn and its koi pond and assorted Greco-Roman statuary. Red dress and sensible shoes; she didn't wear any jewelry or makeup. She gently closed her hand around my throat and planted a lingering kiss on my cheek. Felt as if she could've torn my head off with a twitch. We locked gazes—her pupil

flickered yellow and back to black again, foreshadowing troubles galore. I gave not a shit. My legs trembled. Anxiety evaporated, replaced by thrill. Pheromones, mad pheromones.

The plan, such as it was, was to play hard to get, work the charm offensive, gain access to the Bird Woman's home and acquire the formula. Babies, those best-laid stratagems went out the window the instant I got a whiff of her scent.

No, man. Averna didn't have "sharp features," or a "cruel nose," or "talon-like" hands (usually), or any such shit. Dark hair, brown eyes (usually), athletic. The record put her on the backside of fifty. Up close and personal, she felt a hell of a lot younger; ripped as a gymnast (a decathlete?), and nary a wrinkle or crow's foot. Averna understood how to walk, how to hold herself motionless the way politicians and models do, how to project her personality with kinetic force. Cool to the touch. Worth forty billion and enamored of esoteric scientific research. Spencer's corporations funded an assortment of crazy projects. Despite this massive wealth, her name seldom surfaced outside of highly insulated circles. A bizarre, protean vibe emanated from her and her retinue. Is evil (capital E evil) protean? That would explain much.

Invited me to freshen up (my quarters contained every amenity including evening wear in my size) and take a stroll with her resident PR man. Dinner at seven on the dot.

I toured the house. Bizarre and immense (immense even before factoring in a network of shops, garages, and the sector of hexagonal cottages where she stashed her off duty workforce and security personnel).

Envision a three-wing mansion of redwood logs and slate, mated to a giant bisected Bucky Ball on loan from the Martians—soaring, crystal-domed atriums with copses of full-sized pine trees and willows and a river falling over glass-smooth rocks; cozy parlors where fake flames danced inside hearths; steel bulkhead hatches concealed by cherry wood paneling and illustrated hangings that were sufficiently moth-eaten to indicate pricelessness; and an array of security cameras, some obvious and others

less so. Most of the art was of the abstract genre. I didn't recognize anything.

Averna Spencer's PR lackey (a chipper guy named James who smiled like a hostage in fear of his life) took me in tow. According to my guide, the floorplan included a sauna, gymnasium, theater, bowling alley, discotheque, shooting range, and a spa. When his back was turned, I peeked inside vases and cabinets—no corpses, no skeletons. The circuit ended with a glimpse inside a museum gallery that would've made a nice addition to the Smithsonian. Dinosaur bones, suspended biplanes, and a two-story spire of glossy, radiant yellow crystal. The usual weird stuff one might expected to find in the trophy den of a megalomaniacal billionaire murderess.

When I craned my neck to get a better look, James became nervous.

"Ms. Spencer would prefer to show you these special exhibits herself. Someone accidentally left this open . . . "

"That's a huge chunk of crystal, Jimmy," I said. "Last I saw something like that was on the cover of a 1970s science fiction novel. And the bird skeleton . . . What's the wingspan? Twenty feet? Is it a pterodactyl?"

"No, ma'am, it is not a pterodactyl." James pulled a pair of brass-plated doors shut. "*Argentavis magnificens.* An extinct predator. Among the largest of her kind. She devoured prey whole. Shall we move toward the dining room?" He wiped his brow and checked his watch.

"The crystal. You simply have to give me the scoop, Jimbo."

"Ms. Spencer awaits." He led the way, and briskly.

"Does Manson handle the executions around here?"

He glanced over his shoulder, eyes glassy-bright. "Mainly, yes."

A woman spends her early adult years at hatcheries and aboard fishing trawlers doing the honest labor of tracking and cataloguing salmon (that great Alaskan export), and nobody cares. Americans want their food marginally harmless in a marginally attractive package; the fewer details, the better. A woman gets attacked by a mass murderer and lives to tell, everybody wants a piece of the action.

Type *Jessica M* into any search engine and the auto-form will suggest *Jessica Mace & Eagle Talon Ripper; Jessica Mace US Magazine; Jessica Mace Nude Photos; Jessica Mace Final Girl.* Averna Spencer hadn't merely followed my career as portrayed in the media, she knew my whole origin story—how a while back, I'd barely survived an apartment complex massacre and fire; how I'd risen from near-death and killed the killer; how I'd bailed on my fifteen minutes and vanished (like mother, like daughter). She'd also obtained facts regarding my unpublicized excursions on the road. Averna confessed her fascination regarding people who had confronted the vicissitudes of existence in an intimate manner. I took it to mean she'd burned ants with a magnifying glass as a kid.

We finished supper and wandered through her hanging gardens and lesser aviaries. Flocks of tropical birds dwelled inside a dome of sparkly mesh that protected a lush jungle biome. It would take the gross national product of a small country to stock and maintain such a preserve.

Our path wound through an imported jungle. Paper lanterns (grotesque busts of birds of prey) cast our primeval surroundings in the light of an animated Kipling adaptation. Climate control simulated the tropics. Humidity soaked my clothes and I almost believed the sliver of moonlight peeping through leaves was other than a subtly masked klieg.

She said, "You're rather trusting for a woman who's had her throat slashed. Do you jump into a helicopter with any total stranger?"

"Manson isn't the kind of person you argue with." I raised my voice to compete with raucous chatter of birds and mating frogs.

"Manson is an extension of my will. I made her."

"Made her? As in Pygmalion?"

"Isn't that the idiom the cool kids are using?"

"Yes. Do me next, pretty please."

"I projected my life essence into her puny mortal frame and voila, a million-year evolutionary leap. It's a messy process. Not for weak stomachs."

Seemed an appropriate point to change the subject. "I read in an article that you employ a team of geneticists and zoologists. You want to protect

endangered bird species.” Campbell and Ryoko’s dossier alleged that Averna Spencer hired mercenaries to shoot nest robbers and sabotage the infrastructure of land developers who operated in environmentally-sensitive regions such as South America.

“The science team pursues much grander designs,” she said. “We work to resurrect a spectrum of extinct species. Avian, reptile, amphibian. I’m worried for honeybees. As our apian friends go, so go we.”

“The research is conducted here, in house?”

“Yes, and in twenty-three other countries.”

“Good thing you’re loaded. Woman could burn through a fortune on fringe research.”

“She could. Or she could manipulate a host of international political actors to foot the bill. Drug lords, warlords, bored industrialists . . . It isn’t as difficult to separate them from their spare millions as you might think.”

“Any luck raising the dodo from the dead?”

“Sixty-eight percent of this aviary system is populated by animals that no longer exist in the outside world.”

I flashed to the giant bird skeleton in the private museum, and how the tall, crystal had seethed with a weird yellow fire. Decided to zip my lips. Averna’s stride, long and graceful, reminded me of her unnatural strength. Her friendly smile hinted at savagery.

“My most prized work isn’t specific to avian research,” she said. “I hope to create a trigger of human evolution. A radically accelerated process.”

“Mutation.”

“After a fashion.”

“Toward what end?”

“The ability to survive dramatic climate change. To withstand nuclear radiation and acid rain. To think faster. To dispense with antiquated paradigms of morality and ethics. To soar with the eagles and swim with the fishes.”

“Things mad scientists say for five hundred, Alex,” I said. “Any notable successes, a la *The Island of Doctor Moreau?”*

“Me, a scientist? Hardly. Certainly, I’m slightly bonkers and quite ancient. Old people acquire knowledge. We spread it around, for weal or woe. As to the matter of success, I’m banking on getting lucky tonight, at least. Let’s swing by your room for a nightcap.”

“Mine? Surely yours is more luxurious.”

She took my arm rather possessively. “I sleep hanging upside down from a trapeze bar in Aviary 4. It’s not a cozy rendezvous.”

All I could see was the mask of the devil bird in the video clip, the feather plume; her victim’s corpse tumbling toward the water; men and women screaming in a solarium, its walls splattered in gore. Averna, radiant and exultant as a blood god from the bad history books.

Half a magnum of 1928 Krug later:

“Final girls are a necessarily rare breed.” Averna studied my calloused palms, the yellow bruises along my shoulder. Her nails were trimmed close to the quick and unpolished. Dark specks of blood had gotten under some of them. “Your training regimen is fierce. No enhanced strength or ESP? No telekinetic powers?”

“I skate along on woman’s intuition.”

“No secret weaponry of any kind?”

“Apparently, I’m a mongoose. Natural weaponry. Rawr!”

“She kissed my (also bruised) belly. “I am curious what combination of pathology and trauma drives you to seek danger.”

“This from Miss I-jump-off-cliffs-in a-wingsuit?”

“Pretend a normal person you’d like to fuck asked the question. The event in Alaska opened the world for you.”

“Opened the world? Like I should be grateful? I never volunteered to get brutalized. I didn’t tip that domino. The attack fucked me up royal.” I resisted the urge to touch the scar on my neck.

“Or it awakened dormant DNA. Your latent adrenaline junkie gene.”

“You know how it is—at first, it’s about the rush, then the rush becomes a habit. After a while, you’re basically screwed.”

“Give it an eon. Who’s your favorite superhero?”

“Let me think . . . ”

“Don’t think, tell me.”

“Like tic-tac-toe?” I stalled.

“Cheating already.”

“Okay. The Batman.”

“Not Batgirl?”

“Defending my answer wasn’t part of the game. I want every bit of power. You?”

“Captain Midnight.”

“Who’s Captain Midnight?”

“Seriously?” Averna cupped her chin and regarded me. “I’m reevaluating this whole relationship.”

“All six hours of it.”

“My time is precious, Mace. Bouquets of thousand dollar bills could rain from the sky and it wouldn’t be cost effective to stoop for the ones that didn’t fall into my pocket.”

“Okay, don’t be rethinking anything. Give me a mulligan. Who the hell is Captain Midnight?”

“Ace World War One pilot. Could fly anything. Total badass.”

“You’re busting my balls over a cartoon from World War One?”

She undid my bra and tossed it over the side. “Radio show.”

“Seems like an odd choice for a hero,” I said.

“Not if you knew me for more than six hours.”

Ultimately, I told her my darkest secrets: Mom and Dad fought over the heavyweight title and it brought the Mace kids together; my first real love rescued me from the galley of a fishing boat right before it went to the bottom of the sea and a few happy years went by and nobody was around to rescue him; Mom ran out on us a hundred times, and finally, she stayed

gone for good, either dead or reborn; when the Eagle Talon Ripper sliced my throat, I thought I'd died. Such a relief! The real reason I emptied the gun into the sonofabitch was because he'd done a half-assed job putting me out of my misery.

"At last I understand your motivation," Averna said. "It isn't thrill-seeking behavior. You experience suicidal ideation, probably stemming from survivor's guilt."

"I'm not suicidal anymore. Guilt? Not so much of that ether."

"Dying isn't easy for most people. Instinct is a real bitch and she wants to live. Sadly, those with a true death wish, suffer terribly. O cruel universe. It imbued you with unbearable misery and a rational mind. Care to guess what the mind says?"

"Let's fuck? Let's drink? Let's forget?"

"The mind says, no more, let's stop. The universe also imbued you with the genetics of a survivor. *Your* subconscious resists annihilation; it says, okay, you can die, but only after jumping through fiery hoops, only after completing an obstacle course in hell. Some people with your particular affliction drink themselves to death or go hunting for Mr. Goodbar. They take on risky jobs. You, my dear, follow this hard road. It led to my doorstep."

"The other shoe droppeth," I said.

"Just your panties, at the moment."

What's *your* motivation?"

Her long, cruel fingers dug into my hips. "I like it when my prey runs screaming through the forest. I like the idea that animals will inherit the earth. I like the idea that with a little push we could be apes again."

"Oh," I said.

On day two we buzzed the estate in the helicopter. Trees, tree-covered mountains, tree-covered valleys, and more trees. Averna piloted. She wore a shiny black flight suit that exaggerated her figure into comic book

proportions. Manson sat in the rear, loose-limbed and heavy-lidded. Her suit and mine were dull gray.

My secret of the day: I'd seen this before. In the course of training for the mission, Dr. Campbell had put me into a hypnotic trance and shown dozens of satellite images of the territory. Military grade imagery that dialed right down to the individual acorn. He explained that a photographic memory wasn't necessary to retain this information—if I got lost in these woods, a certain phrase would trigger the implanted memories and I'd have access to a 3D "mind map" of the surroundings.

I keyed the mike in my headset. "Averna, I read somewhere that you almost died testing a wingsuit in Finland."

"Norway. Bad landings happen. Fortunately, the crash appeared nastier than the reality."

Witnesses said she'd hit the turf at an estimated one-hundred and thirty-miles per hour. The article also claimed it required a team of surgeons four operations and a roll of duct tape to put Humpty-Dumpty together again.

"Tycoons evidently score the world's greatest docs. I know women with C-section scars that could've been done with a boar spear."

"Flawless skin was a gift from my mother. Hold on." She banked hard right and put the helicopter into a shallow dive toward the foothills. We shot through a notch in the tree line and she leaned back on the yoke into a near vertical climb to hop over the rocky crown of a hill, then pushed hard and dropped hard to skim several feet above a lake, and steeply up again at the last second as a wall of evergreens closed in. My heart remained where it had leapt from my chest, a couple miles back.

Upon our return to the house, I retreated to my room and pondered the implications. Eighteen hours with Averna Spencer convinced me she didn't possess a scintilla of spontaneity. Her brain functioned on a beautiful, cold algorithm that perfectly mimicked human thought, human desire, yet possessed the nascent spark of neither. Rich folks often exhibit outsized egos and a narcissistic compulsion to impress the peasants. Averna didn't give a damn. She'd taken me on the flyover to demonstrate the geography and parameters of her estate for a practical purpose. In retrospect, the

message was no less subtle than if she'd leaned over and whispered that I should get my track shoes laced. It's on like Donkey Kong, girlfriend.

The second message was delivered much later in the evening as I prowled through the house, casually testing locks and poking my nose where it didn't belong. Happened to peek into an antechamber and Lo! Averna (naked and gleaming) straddled Manson (naked and gleaming) atop a couch. Averna swallowed grapes from a prodigious clump. She regurgitated into Manson's wide-open mouth and sealed it with a kiss. She winked at me. Her yellow eye reflected the epoch when scales and dagger-length talons were king (queen).

I backed away slowly, as one does when menaced by a large and partially satiated predator. Propelled by unreasonable jealousy, I strode to Averna's quarters, temporarily dismantled the security feed with an electromagnetic device disguised as an earring (in addition to zoology, exobiology, physical anthropology, and several other disciplines, including hypnotism, obviously, Doc Campbell dabbled in experimental engineering), and went straight for the safe. I'd memorized the combo and the doctors assured me that all I needed to do was glance at the documents; vital contents would be retrieved via hypnosis during my debriefing. Campbell assured me the mind operated like a camera and everything it experienced was undeveloped film.

The safe lay empty but for a piece of paper that read, *Bluebeard is a cautionary tale, lover*, and signed with a lipstick kiss.

I decided to hoof it, mission be damned, and take my chances in the mountains with the bears and the wolves and the inevitable pursuit. Two guards were posted on either side of my bedroom door. Stony-faced guys in military uniforms, assault rifles at port arms. So much for sneaking off, stage left.

Day three, several guests emerged to join the fun. Averna behaved as the convivial lady of the manor. We played games of the mundane variety. Mini golf and horseshoes in a horseshoe pit worthy of the Roman Coliseum. Manson caught my attention and casually straightened an iron horseshoe with her bare hands.

Then supper.

While gnawing on a pheasant wing and swilling fancy imported lager, I rubbed elbows with the new folks. Three of them had arrived at the estate a week prior; two others had gotten flown in that morning. Young men, down at the heels, but strong and athletic. Army guys who hadn't readjusted to life stateside; a boozy ex-cop; a kid maybe six months clear of high school where he'd wrestled varsity; and a couple cop/soldier wannabes. Each of them hoped to score a permanent security gig or at least a free ride as long as it lasted. I chatted the boys up—no close family; they were at loose ends. Nobody back home would notice, much less care, when they went missing. I won't bother with names; simpler to think of them as Hapless Victims #1 through #5.

Manson stood next to me at the bar. She wore a dark gown and a star pattern of heavy purple eyeshadow. "We don't usually entertain more than a couple of guests. This is special."

"What's the occasion?"

"It's Tuesday. Go back to your quarters. Ms. Spencer left you a gift."

"Because it's Tuesday?"

"Because there will be entertainment later this evening and you may wish to dress appropriately."

This is where you came in . . .

Averna kept me stewing (quite literally) for forty-eight hours, plus or minus; a fact I estimated by the phase of the moon and an above average internal clock.

Why giant synthetic eggs? The design of the incubators was strictly symbolic. The contents--a contemporary primordial soup chock full of vitamins, proteins, and assorted mystery elements intended to cleanse her chosen, to heighten our reflexes and provide sufficient high-test nourishment for a proper hunt--could've done its work in a tank. She preferred elaborate theatrics; a consequence of eternal life. Have to wonder which came first: murderous rage or immortality. Since I could only hazard

a guess, I guessed the eggs were deposited at various predetermined sites on the estate. We prisoners “hatched” and were subsequently hunted by our hostess and her majordomo.

During incubation, my dreams were psychedelic and fantastically, Lucio-Fulci-strength, macabre. Visions, perhaps. I beheld the male guests pelting through a night forest roiling with phosphorescent mist. Averna glided down on stiff, black wings. Her wingsuit defied physics. She tilted vertically and her toes dug into the soil every third or fourth gigantic stride and beheaded each of the fleeing men with a casual swipe of her metallic talons. She accelerated in dizzying curlicues through gaps in the trees.

Averna crooned to me through an intravenous drip. She spoke of evolutionary slippage, of natural mutation and genetic manipulation.

I die and live again and again. My soul regenerates into new flesh.

I have broken the hearts of countless men. I have eaten the beating hearts of countless men. I have devoured so many beating hearts, I shit and piss black heartblood.

I am a fountainhead of raped vitality.

I am a supplicant of the gods of eternal return.

I mean to devour you as I’ve devoured the rest in their multitudes.

You’ll regenerate as I have done since the dawn of hominids. We’ll meet again in a hundred million years at the dawn of the hominids. We’ll meet again between one scream and the next.

Wake up, wake up, wake up . . .

I love and hate *The Vanishing.* The Dutch version by Sluizer; don’t bother with the American remake, hunky Jeff Bridges notwithstanding. In a previous life, I made my bread as a marine biologist. I survived many a tedious night aboard fishing tenders on the Bering Sea with a stack of paperbacks and VHS tapes while the rest of the crew was drunk or unconscious. Somewhere in the middle of *The Vanishing* a character describes a nightmare of being trapped in the darkness of a golden egg.

Love it because the image got to me on a primal level and stuck. Hate it for the same reason.

These many years later, waking to fluid blackness three thousand miles east of Alaska, tubes up my nose and down my throat, body coiled like an embryo inside a golden egg of my very own? Must be the abyss everybody talks about.

I kicked, one-two, and dove deep into a sea of blood. Crimson light churned. The shell cracked and broke and the universe spilled me onto a carpet of pine needles. Out came the rubber tubes with a yank; then a bout of projectile vomiting--pheasant, sorbet, and copious amounts of whiskey and synthetic amniotic fluid. The blood in my eyes seeped down and dried into scales. Tears dug diamond furrows through caked-on grime. My convulsions subsided. I stood and leaned like a drunk against the bole of a hemlock and assessed the fucked-uppedness of my situation.

A mild evening in early October. Mosquitos whined; could have been worse. Clouds rolled over a crescent moon. Had to think fast, had to move. Standing still would get me dead. *Moving* would get me dead. Where was Rikki-tikki-tavi in my hour of need? An owl screeched. The bird glided past; the very shadow of death itself.

I'd trained for the direst scenarios—spent the previous several months jogging barefoot to toughen my feet; I also worked on traveling in New England forests at night to sharpen my lowlight vison. An affinity for rough and tumble notwithstanding, no way, no how am I a martial artist. I sparred with Beasley, who agreed (after I walked into his right hand three or four times) keeping it simple would be for the best. He honed my bag of dirty tricks and taught me a couple new ones.

Should've done more. Should've stayed in bed.

For all the roadwork and psychological preparation, and despite my alleged "purpose" and indomitable resolve, it was a psychological body blow to wash up on the proverbial lee shore: naked in the middle of the woods in the dead of night, pumped to the gills with experimental juice and on the run from Elizabeth Bathory II and her army of mercs. I intoned Dr. Campbell's mnemonic phrase (*the mind is a camera)* that would supposedly trigger a pseudo-holographic image of the surroundings. It worked, too.

I waded down a stream to confuse tracking dogs, then dug a hole near the roots of a tree and covered myself in clay, pine needles, and sap. I hadn't worn hair products or used scented soap or perfume in months. The docs put me on a regimen of an experimental, military grade antiperspirant.

Smeared head to toe in muck, I ran like hell through the dark, dark woods like the doomed heroine of a slasher flick. I angled southeast for the extraction point (would Beasley await my arrival?); kept right on trucking until daylight and then burrowed into a deadfall and slept. Night came around. I slurped brackish water from a puddle and set forth again, skulking from tree to tree with a wild animal's determination to survive. For a while, I believed I'd successfully evade and escape. Hope makes fools of us all.

Contrary to the cliché, I didn't trip and sprain an ankle, didn't sob or shriek to give away my position, and didn't glance over my shoulder every ten feet. Perversely, that last detail proved my downfall.

She hit me the way a hawk or an owl does an unsuspecting squirrel. Instead of severing my spine on impact, Averna merely snagged my long, luxurious mane and ascended vertically, yanking me off my feet. Similar to those rides at the State Fair—the ones where a scabrous, hungover carny straps you into a harness that dangles from a big metal wheel and up your sorry ass goes, with nothing between your sneakers and sod but a sheer drop.

The radiant sickle moon gashed the clouds; first above, then below. Averna clutched my hair in her left fist and skimmed treetops at a precipitous velocity, dragging me several feet lower like the tail of a kite. We dipped and swooned; accelerating, decelerating. If she had a jet pack strapped on her back, I didn't hear it. The only sounds I heard were the hissing breeze, and the clatter of branches when she swung me viciously against the canopy. Each blow knocked the breath from me and tore my flesh.

God knows where the bitch's flight plan would've taken us. I didn't stick around for the surprise. It required a metric fuck-ton of grit to recover from the initial whiplash and saw through my hair with a shard of the designer egg I'd carried (and managed not to drop) this entire time. Sliced my

fingers and palm, but it got the job done—half a dozen convulsive hacks later, the last strand parted and I bailed. She cried my name.

Momentum hurled me in a broad arc. I caromed from leafy boughs and they snapped beneath my cannonball passage. Five seconds? Five thousand years? Those few heartbeats stretched across multiple lifetimes. Don't remember hitting the earth. Black stars cleared and I lay in a pile of dead, slimy leaves, oxygen smashed from my lungs, gaping at the moon.

A circling shadow blotted the light. I caught a glimpse of Averna in her radiant glory and realized the mysteries of the universe dwarfed my comprehension. She didn't need a wingsuit. She didn't need wings. She didn't need anything.

Manson strode from the depths of the forest. She didn't put a bullet through my skull as I might've logically assumed. She scooped my battered self (broken ribs, lacerated hand, and a world class concussion) into her arms and lugged me half a mile to the cabin. I don't recall a hell of a lot about the next couple of days except that the place was empty. No phone, no Beasley. Pretty clear my fate had been sealed from the beginning.

Manson played nursemaid by firelight from a decrepit hearth. Stuffed me into a sleeping bag and got an I.V. drip pumping fluids into my veins. Everything went blurry after the adrenalin wore off.

I dreamed that Averna, garbed in her horror show suit, shattered the cabin door and loomed over me as I lay helpless. Her wingtips scraped furrows in the walls. *Behold. I am the apex. I stand where humanity begins and where it will end.* She lovingly popped my eyeballs with her claws.

Woke screaming to beat the band.

Averna, dressed in a natty jacket, tenderly stroked my brow with a damp cloth. She revealed I was merely the second person to ever make it across the finish line. For me to plummet from the treetops and bounce instead of splat, represented a bona fide miracle. I didn't argue the point. Fell unconscious for however long it took for my injuries to mend.

Jessica, you must understand we're all meat and blood for the slaughterhouse. Regardless, we should learn until the very end. Sapient

beings exist to acquire experience. The beasts of the wilderness kill and eat us. The wilderness itself kills and eats us. Every scrap down to our quintessence reduces and divides among maggots and dirt and adds to the sum.

Go in peace, dear girl. You and the world have unfinished business. Far be it from me to stand in the way.

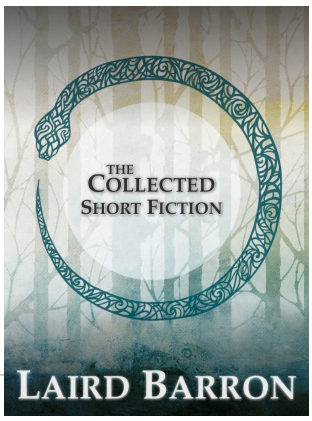
Could've been a fever dream, could've been legit; either way, Averna and Manson let me live. Eventually I roused from blind sleep, aching, traumatized, and swaddled in gauze. The girls left clean clothes, pain pills, and an envelope with a few bucks inside a knapsack. Also, a loaded pistol and keys to a Jeep parked by the front porch.

Time passed. I bided it with grim patience.

Beasley the vigilant had to sleep sometime. I waited until he embarked upon one of his not infrequent drunks to make my move. Walked into the New England farmhouse around dawn. The doctors were seated at a table in the den, bickering over a pile of research papers. They registered surprise at my appearance, although less than one might expect. Fuckers had seen everything at least once, I suppose. Dr. Ryoko reached for a drawer, then noticed the pistol in my hand, and sat back with a resigned sigh.

"Hello, boys," I said. "Tell me about my mother."

Girls Without Their Faces On



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Delia's father had watched her drowning when she was a little girl. The accident happened in a neighbor's pool. Delia lay submerged near the bottom, her lungs filling with chlorinated water. She could see Dad's distorted form bent forward, shirtsleeves rolled to the elbow, cigarette dangling from his lips, blandly inquisitive. Mom scooped Delia out and smacked her between the shoulder blades while she coughed and coughed.

Delia didn't think about it often. Not often.

Barry F threw a party at his big, opulent house on Hillside East. He invited people to come after sundown. A whole slew of them heeded the call. Some guests considered Barry F an eccentric. This wasn't eccentric—sundown comes early in autumn in Alaska. Hours passed and eventually the door swung wide, emitting piano music, laughter, a blaze of chandelier light. Three silhouettes lingered; a trinity of Christmas ghosts: Delia; Delia's significant other, J; and Barry F.

"—the per capita death rate in Anchorage is outsized," Barry F said. "Out-fucking-sized. This town is the armpit. No, it's the asshole—"

"*Bethel* is the asshole," J said.

"Tell it on the mountain, bro."

"I'll tell you why Bethel is the worst. My dad was there on a job for the FAA in '77. He's eating breakfast at the Tundra Diner and a janitor walks past his table, lugging a honey bucket—"

"Honey bucket?"

“Plumbing froze, so folks crapped in a bucket and dumped it in a sewage lagoon out back. Honey bucket. It’s a joke. Anyway, the dude trips on his shoelace…Go on. Imagine the scene. Envision that motherfucker. Picking toilet paper outta your scrambled eggs kills the appetite. Plus, cabin fever, and homies die in the bush all the livelong day. Alcoholism, poverty, rape. Worst of the worst.”

“Please,” Delia said. “Can we refrain from trashing a native village for the sin of not perfectly acclimating to a predatory takeover by the descendants of white European invaders?”

“Ooh, my girlfriend doesn’t enjoy the turn of conversation. Sorry, my precious little snowflake. Folks weren’t so politically correct in the 1970s. I’m just reporting the news.”

“If we’re talking about assholes, look no further than a mirror.”

“Kids, kids, don’t fight, don’t derail the train,” Barry F said with an oily, avuncular smile. “Anchorage is still bad. Right?”

“Wretched. Foul.”

“And on that note…” Delia said.

“Haven’t even gotten to the statistics for sexual assault and disappearances —”

“—Satanists. Diabolists. Scientologists. Cops found a hooker’s corpse bound to a headboard at the Viking Motel.”

“Lashed to the mast, eh?”

“You said it.”

“Hooker? Wasn’t she a stripper, though? Candy Bunny, Candy Hunny…?”

“Hooker, stripper, I dunno. White scarves, black candles. Blood everywhere. News called it a ritual killing. They’re combing the city for suspects.”

“Well, Tito and Benny were at the Bush Company the other night and I haven’t seen ‘em since…”

“Ha-ha, those cut-ups!”

“I hope not literally.”

“We’re due for some ritual insanity. Been saying it for months.”

“Why are we due?”

“Planet X is aligning with the sun. Its passage messes with gravitational forces, brain chemistry, libidos, et cetera. Like the full moon affects crazies, except dialed to a hundred. Archeologists got cave drawings that show this has been a thing since Neanderthals were stabbing mammoths with sharpened sticks.”

“The malignant influence of the gods.”

“The malignant influence of the Grays.”

“The Grays?”

“Little gray men: messengers of the gods; cattle mutilators; anal probe-ists…”

“They hang around Bethel, eh?”

“No way to keep up with the sheer volume of insanity this state produces. Oh, speaking of brutalized animals, there was the Rabbit Massacre in Wasilla.”

“Pure madness.”

“Dog mutilations. So many doggy murders. I sorta hate dogs, but really, chopping off their paws is too damned far.”

“And on that note…!” Delia stepped backward onto the porch for emphasis.

“On that note. Hint taken, baby doll. Later, sucker.”

A couple separated from the raucous merriment of the party. The door shut behind them and they were alone in the night.

“What’s a Flat Affect Man?” Delia wore a light coat, miniskirt, and heels. She clutched J’s arm as they descended the flagstone steps alongside a treacherously steep driveway. Porchlights guided them partway down the slope.

“Where did you hear that?” Sportscoat, slacks, and high-top tennis shoes for him. Surefooted as a mountain goat. The softness of his face notwithstanding, he had a muscle or two.

“Barry F mentioned it to that heavyset guy in the turtleneck. You were chatting up turtleneck dude’s girlfriend. The chick who was going to burst

out of her mohair sweater.”

“I wasn’t flirting. She’s comptroller for the university. Business, always business.”

“Uh-huh. Curse of the Flat Affect Men, is what Barry said.”

“Well, forget what you heard. There are things woman was not meant to know. You’ll just spook yourself.”

She wanted to smack him, but her grip was precarious and she’d had too many drinks to completely trust her balance.

Hillside East was heavily wooded. Murky at high noon and impenetrable come the witching hour. Neighborhoods snaked around ravines and subarctic meadows and copses of deep forest. Cul-de-sacs might host a house or a bear den. But that was Anchorage. A quarter of a million souls sprinkled across seventeen-hundred square miles of slightly suburbanized wilderness. Ice water to the left, mountains to the right, Aurora Borealis weeping radioactive tears. October nights tended to be crisp. Termination dust gleamed upon the Chugach peaks, on its way down like a shroud, creeping ever lower through the trees.

A few more steps and he unlocked the car and helped her inside. He’d parked away from the dozen or so other vehicles that lined the main road on either side of the mailbox. His car was practically an antique. Its dome light worked sporadically. Tonight, nothing. The interior smelled faintly of a mummified animal.

The couple sat in the dark. Waiting.

She regarded the black mass of forest to her right, ignoring his hand on her thigh. Way up the hillside, the house’s main deck projected over a ravine. Bay windows glowed yellow. None of the party sounds reached them in the car. She imagined the turntables gone silent and the piano hitting a lone minor key, over and over. Loneliness born of aching disquiet stole over her. No matter that she shared a car with J nor that sixty people partied hardy a hundred yards away. Her loneliness might well have sprung from J’s very proximity.

After nine months of dating, her lover remained inscrutable.

J lived in a duplex that felt as sterile as an operating room—television, double bed, couch, and a framed poster of the cosmos over the fake fireplace (a faux fireplace in Alaska was almost too much irony for her system). A six-pack in the fridge; a half-empty closet. He consulted for the government, finagling cost-efficient ways to install fiberoptic communications in remote native villages. That's *allegedly* what he did when he disappeared for weeks on end. Martinis were his poison, Andy Kaufman his favorite (dead?) entertainer, and electronica his preferred music. His smile wasn't a reliable indicator of mood or temperament.

Waking from a strange, fragmentary dream, to a proverbial splash of cold water, Delia accepted that the romance was equally illusory.

"What is your job?" she said, experiencing an uncomfortable epiphany of the ilk that plagued heroines in gothic tales and crime dramas. It was unwise for a woman to press a man about his possibly nefarious double life, and yet so it went. Her lips formed the words and out they flew, the skids greased by a liberal quantity of vino.

"Same as it was in April," he said. "Why?"

"Somebody told me they saw you at the airport buying a ticket to Nome in early September. You were supposed to be in Two Rivers that week."

"Always wanted to visit Nome. Haunt of late career Wyatt Earp. Instead, I hit Two Rivers and got a lousy mug at the gift shop."

"Show me the mug when I come over for movie night."

"Honey pie, sugar lump! Is that doubt I hear in your voice?"

"It is."

"Fine, you've got me red-handed. I shoot walruses and polar bears so wealthy Europeans can play on ivory cribbage boards and strut around in fur bikinis." He caressed her knee and waited, presumably for a laugh. "C'mon, baby. I'm a square with a square job. Your friend must've seen my doppelganger."

"No. What do you actually do? Like for real."

"I really consult." He wore a heavy watch with a metal strap. He pressed harder and the strap dug into her flesh.

“There’s more,” she said. “Right? I’ve tried to make everything add up, and I can’t.”

“Sweetie, just say what’s on your mind.”

“I’m worried. Ever have a moment, smack out of the blue, when you realize you don’t actually know someone? I’m having that moment.”

“Okay. I’m a deep cover Russian agent.”

“Are you?”

“Jeez, you’re paranoid tonight.”

“Or my bullshit detector is finally working.”

“You were hitting it hard in there.” He mimed drinking with his free hand.

“Sure, I was half a glass away from dancing on the piano. Doesn’t mean I’m wrong.”

“Wanna get me on a couch? Wanna meet my mother?”

“People lie to shrinks. Do you even have a mother?”

“I don’t have a shrink. Don’t have a mother.” His hand and the watch strap on his wrist slid back and forth, abrading her skin. “My mother was a… eh, who cares what the supernumerary does? She died. Horribly.”

“J—” Would she be able to pry his hand away? Assuming that failed, could she muster the grit to slap him, or punch him in the family jewels? She hadn’t resorted to violence since decking a middle school classmate who tried to grab her ass on a fieldtrip. Why had she leapt to the worst scenario now? Mom used to warn her about getting into bad situations with sketchy dudes. Mom said of hypothetical date rapists, if shit got real, smile sweetly and gouge the bastard’s eye with a press-on nail.

The phantom piano key in her mind sounded like it belonged in a 1970s horror flick. *How much did I have? Three glasses of red, or four? Don’t let the car start spinning, I might fly into space.*

J paused, head tilted as if concentrating upon Delia’s imagined minor key plinking and plinking. He released her and straightened and held his watch close to his eyes. The watch face was not illuminated. Blue gloom masked everything. Blue gloom made his skull misshapen and enormous. Yet the metal of the watch gathered starlight.

“Were you paying attention when I told Barry that Planet X is headed toward our solar system?” he said.

“Yes.” Except…Barry had told J, hadn’t he?

“Fine. I’m gonna lay some news on you, then. You ready for the news?”

She said she was ready for the news.

“Planet X isn’t critical,” he said. “Important, yes. Critical, no. Who cares about a chunk of ice? Not so exciting. Her *star* is critical. A brown dwarf. It has, in moments of pique that occur every few million years, emitted a burst of highly lethal gamma rays and bombarded hapless worlds many light years distant. Every organism on those planets died instantly. Forget the radiation. She can do other things with her heavenly body. Nemesis Star first swung through the heart of the Oort Cloud eons past. Bye-bye dinosaurs. Nemesis’ last massive gravitational wave intersected the outer fringe of Sol System in the 1970s. Nemesis has an erratic orbit, you see. Earth got the succeeding ripple effect. Brownouts, tidal waves, earthquakes, all them suicides in Japan… A second wave arrived twenty years later. The third and final wave hit several days ago. Its dying edge will splash Earth in, oh, approximately forty-five seconds.”

“What?” she said. “I don’t get it.”

“And it’s okay. This is when *they* come through is all you need to understand. I’m here to greet them. That’s my real job, baby doll. I’m a greeter. Tonight is an extinction event; AKA: a close encounter of the intimate kind.”

Delia fixated on the first part of his explanation. “Greeter. Like a store greeter?” She thought of the Central Casting grandad characters stationed at the entrance of certain big box stores who bared worn dentures in a permanent rictus.

“Stay. I forgot my jacket.” J (wearing his jacket, no less) exited the car and be-bopped into the night.

Stay. As if she were an obedient mutt. She rubbed her thigh and watched his shadow float along the driveway and meld into the larger darkness. Chills knifed through her. The windows began to fog over with her breath.

He’d taken the keys. She couldn’t start the car to get warm or listen to the radio. *Or drive away from the scene of the crime.*

Delia’s twenty-fifth birthday loomed on the horizon. She had majored in communication with a side of journalism at the University of Alaska Anchorage. She was a culture reporter, covering art and entertainment for the main Anchorage daily paper.

People enjoyed her phone manner. In person, she was persistent and vaguely charming. Apolitical; non-judgmental as a Swiss banker. Daddy had always said not to bother her pretty little head. Daddy was a sexist pig to his dying breath; she heeded the advice anyhow. Half of what interviewees relayed went in one ear and out the other with nary a whistle-stop. No matter; her memory snapped shut on the most errant of facts like the teeth of a steel leghold trap. Memory is an acceptable day-to-day substitute for intellect.

Her older brothers drove an ambulance and worked in construction respectively. Her little sister graduated from Onager High next spring. Little sister didn’t have journalistic aspirations. Sis yelled, *Fake news!* When gentlemen callers (bikers and punk rockers) loaded her into their chariots and hied into the sunset.

Delia lived in an apartment with two women. She owned a dog named Atticus. Her roommates loved Atticus and took care of him when she couldn’t make it home at a reasonable hour. They joked about stealing him when they eventually moved onward and upward with trophy spouses and corporate employment. *I’ll cut a bitch*, she always said with a smile, not joking at all.

Should she ring them right then for an emergency extraction? “Emergency” might be a tad extreme, yet It seemed a reasonable plan. Housemate A had left on an impromptu overnighter with her boyfriend. Housemate B’s car was in the shop. Housemate B helpfully suggested that Delia call a taxi, or, if she felt truly threatened, the cops. Housemate B was on record as disliking J.

Am *I feeling threatened?* Delia pocketed her phone and searched her feelings.

Her ambulance-driving brother (upholding the family tradition of advising Delia to beware a cruel, vicious world) frequently lectured about the hidden dangers surrounding his profession. Firemen and paramedics habitually rushed headlong into dicey situations, exposing themselves to the same risks as police and soldiers, except without guns or backup. *Paramedics get jacked up every day. While you're busy doing CPR on a subject, some street-dwelling motherfucker will shiv you in the kidney and grab your wallet. Only way to survive is to keep your head on a swivel and develop a sixth sense. The hairs on the back of your neck prickle, you better look around real quick.*

Words to live by. She touched the nape of her neck. Definitely prickling, definitely goosebumps and not from the chill. She climbed out and made her way into the bushes, clumsier than a prey animal born to the art of disappearing, but with no less alacrity.

She stood behind a large spruce, hand braced against its rough bark. Sap stuck to her palm. It smelled bitter-green. Her thigh stung where a raspberry bush had torn her stocking and drawn blood. A starfield pulsed through ragged holes in the canopy. She knew jack about stars except the vague notion that mostly they radiated old, old light. Stars lived and died and some were devoured by black holes.

Nearby, J whooped, then whistled; shrill and lethal as a raptor tuning a killing song. Happy and swift.

He sounds well-fucked. Why did her mind leap there? Because his O-face was bestial? Because he loved to squeeze her throat when they fucked? The subconscious always knows best. As did Mama and big brother, apparently.

J's shadow flitted near the car. His whistle segued to the humming of a nameless, yet familiar tune. Delia shrank against the bole of the tree and heard him open the driver's door. After a brief pause, he called her name. First, still inside and slightly muffled (did he think she was hiding under a seat cushion?); second, much louder toward the rising slope behind him; last, aimed directly toward her hiding spot. Her residual alcohol buzz evaporated as did most of the spit in her mouth.

"Delia, sweetheart," he said. "Buttercup, pumpkin, sugar booger. I meant to say earlier how much I adore the fact you didn't wear makeup tonight. The

soap and water look is sexxxxxy! I prefer a girl who doesn't put on her face when she meets the world. It lights my fire, boy howdy. But now you gotta *come here*." His voice thickened at the end. By some trick of the dark, his eyes flared dull-bright crimson. His lambent gaze pulsed for several heartbeats, then faded, and he became a silhouette again. "No?" he said in his regular voice. "Be that way. I hope you brought mad money, because you're stranded on a lee shore. Should I cruise by your apartment instead? Would your roomies and your dog be pleased to meet me while I'm in this mood? Fuck it, sweetheart. I'll surprise you." He laughed, got into the car, and sped away. The red taillights seemed to hang forever; unblinking predatory eyes.

The entire scene felt simultaneously shocking and inevitable.

Of course, she speed-dialed her apartment to warn Housemate B. A robotic voice apologized that the call would not go through. It repeated this apology when she tried the police, her favorite taxi service, and finally, information. Static rose and rose until it roared in her ear and she gave up. She emerged from cover and removed her heels and waited, slightly crouched, to see if J would circle around to catch her in the open. A coyote stalking a ptarmigan. Yeah, that fit her escalating sense of dread—him creeping that ancient car, tongue lolling as he scanned the road for her fleeting shadow.

The cell's penlight projected a ghostly cone. She followed it up the hill to her nearest chance for sanctuary, the house of Barry F. Ah, dear sweet Barry F, swinging senior executive of a successful mining company. He wore wire rim glasses and expensive shirts, proclaimed his loathing of physical labor and cold weather (thus, he was assigned to Alaska, naturally), and hosted plenty of semi-formal parties as befitted the persona of a respectable corporate whip hand—which meant prostitutes were referred to as *companions* and any coke-snorting and pill-popping shenanigans occurred in a discreet guestroom.

Notwithstanding jocular collegiality, Barry and J weren't longtime friends, weren't even close; their business orbits intersected and that was the extent of it. J collected acquaintances across a dizzying spectrum. Scoffing at the quality of humanity in general, he rubbed shoulders with gold-plated tycoons and grubby laborers alike. Similar to the spartan furnishings of his apartment, individual relationships were cultivated relative to his needs.

What need do I *satisfy? Physical? Emotional? Victim?* Delia recalled a talk show wherein the host interviewed women who'd survived encounters with serial killers. One guest, a receptionist, had accompanied a coworker on a camping trip. The "nice guy" wined and dined her, then held a knife to her throat, ready to slash. At the last second, he decided to release her instead. *I planned to kill you for three months. Go on, the fear in your eyes is enough.* The receptionist boogied and reported the incident. Her camping buddy went to prison for the three murders he'd previously committed in that park. Which was to say, how could a woman ever know what squirmed in the brains of men?

As Delia approached the house, the porchlight and the light streaming through the windows snuffed like blown matches. Muffled laughter and the steady thud of bass also ceased. At moments such as this, what was a humble arts and entertainment reporter to do? Nothing in her quarter century of life, on the Last Frontier notwithstanding, had prepared her for this experience: half-frozen, teeth chattering, absolutely alone.

Darkness smothered the neighborhood. Not a solitary lamp glimmered among the terraced elevations or secluded cul-de-sacs. She looked south and west, down into the bowl of the city proper. From her vantage, it appeared that the entire municipality had gone dark. Anchorage's skyline should have suffused the heavens with light pollution. More stars instead; a jagged reef of them, low and indifferent. Ice Age constellations that cast glacial shadows over the mountains.

The phone's beam flickered, perhaps in response to her fear. She assumed the battery must be dying despite the fact she'd charged it prior to the evening's events. It oozed crimson, spattering the stone steps as if she were swinging a censor of phosphorescent dye. She barged through the front door without a how-do-you-do. Warm, at least. In fact, humid as the breath of a panting dog. Her thoughts flashed to dear sweet Fido at the apartment. *God, please don't let J do anything to him. Oh yeah, and good luck to my housemate too.*

She hesitated in the foyer beneath the dead chandelier and put her shoes on. Her sight adjusted enough to discern the contours of her environment. No one spoke, which seemed ominous. Most definitely ominous. A gaggle of drunks trapped in a sudden blackout could be expected to utter any number

of exclamatory comments. Girls would shriek in mock terror and some bluff hero would surely announce he'd be checking the fuse box straight away. There'd be a bit of obligatory ass-grabbing, right? Where were all the cell phones and keychain penlights? A faucet dripped; heating ducts creaked in the walls. This was hardcore Bermuda Triangle-*Mary Celeste* shit.

Snagging a landline was the first order of business. Her heels clicked ominously as she moved around the grand staircase and deeper into the house to its spacious, partially sunken living room.

Everyone awaited her there. Wine glasses and champagne flutes partially raised in toast; heads thrown back, bared teeth glinting here and there; others half-turned, frozen mid-glance, mid-step, mid-gesticulation. Only mannikins could be frozen in such exaggerated positions of faux life. The acid reek of disgorged bowels and viscera filled Delia's nostrils. She smelled blood soaked into dresses and blood dripping from cuffs and hosiery; she smelled blood as it pooled upon the carpet and coagulated in the vents.

Her dying cell phone chose that moment to give up the ghost entirely. She was thankful. Starlight permitted her the merest impressions of the presumed massacre, its contours and topography, nothing granular. Her nose and imagination supplied the rest. Which is to say, bile rose in her throat and her mind fogged over. Questions of why and how did not register. The nauseating intimacy of this abominable scene overwhelmed such trivial considerations.

A closet door opened like an eyeless socket near the baby grand piano. Atticus trotted forth. Delia recognized his general shape and the jingle of his vaccination tags and because for the love of everything holy, who else? The dog stopped near a throng of mutilated party-goers and lapped the carpet between shoes and sandals with increasing eagerness. A human silhouette emerged next and sat on the piano bench. The shape could've been almost anybody. The figure's thin hand passed through a shaft of starlight and plinked a key several times.

B-flat? Delia retained a vague notion of chords—a high school crush showed her the rudiments as a maneuver to purloin her virtue. Yes, B flat,

over and over. Heavily, then softly, softly, nigh invisibly, and heavily again, discordant, jarring, threatening.

I'm sorry you had to bear witness. These words weren't uttered by the figure. They originated at a distance of light years, uncoiling within her consciousness. Her father's voice. *The human animal is driven by primal emotions and urges. How great is your fear, Delia? Does it fit inside a breadbox? Does it fit inside your clutch? This house?*

The shape at the piano gestured with a magician's casual flourish and the faint radiance of the stars flickered to a reddish hue. The red light intensified and seeped into the room.

The voice in her head again: Looking for Mr. Goodbar *stuck with you. Diane Keaton's fate frightened you as a girl and terrifies you as a woman. In J, you suspect you finally drew the short straw. The man with a knife in his pocket, a strangling cord, a snub-nose revolver, the ticket stub with your expiration date. The man to take you camping and return alone. And sweetie, the bastard resembles me, wouldn't you say?*

Ice tinkled in glasses—spinning and slopping. Glasses toppled and fell from nerveless fingers. Shadow-Atticus ceased slurping and made himself scarce behind a couch. He trailed inky pawprints. Timbers groaned; the heart of the living room was released from the laws of physics—it bent at bizarre, corkscrew angles, simultaneously existing on a plane above and below the rest of the interior. Puffs of dust erupted as cracks shot through plaster. The floor tilted and the guests were pulled together, packed cheek to jowl.

There followed a long, dreadful pause. Delia had sprawled to her hands and knees during the abrupt gravitational shift. Forces dragged against her, but she counterbalanced as one might to avoid plummeting off a cliff. She finally got a clean, soul-scarring gander at her erstwhile party companions.

Each had died instantaneously via some force that inflicted terrible bruises, suppurating wounds, and ruptures. The corpses were largely intact and rigidly positioned as a gallery of wax models. Strands of metal wire perforated flesh at various junctures, drew the bodies upright, and connected them into a mass. The individual strands gleamed and converged

overhead as a thick spindle that ascended toward the dome of ceiling, and infinitely farther.

The shape at the piano struck a key and its note was reciprocated by an omnidirectional chime that began at the nosebleed apex of the scale and descended precipitously, boring into plaster, concrete, and bone. The house trembled. Delia pushed herself backward into a wall where normal gravity resumed. She huddled, tempted to make a break for it, and also too petrified to move.

There are two kinds of final girls. The kind who escape and the kind who die. You're the second kind. I am very, very proud, kiddo. You'll do big things.

Cracks split the roof, revealing a viscid abyss with a mouthful of half-swallowed nebulae. It chimed and howled, eternally famished. Bits of tile plummeted into the expanse, joining dead stars. Shoe tips scraped as the guests lifted en mass, lazily revolving like a bleeding mobile carved for an infant god. The mobile jerkily ascended, tugged into oblivion at the barbed terminus of a fisherman's line.

Delia glanced down to behold a lone strand of the (god?) wire burrowing into her wrist, seeking a vein or a bone to anchor itself. She wrenched free and pitched backward against a wall.

The chiming receded, so too the red glow, and the void contentedly suckled its morsel. Meanwhile, the shadow pianist hunched into a fetal position and dissolved. *Run along*, her father said. *Run along, dear. Don't worry your pretty head about any of this.*

Delia ran along.

Alaska winter didn't kill her. Not that this was necessarily Alaska. The land turned gray and waterways froze. Snow swirled over empty streets and empty highways and buried inert vehicles. Powerlines collapsed and copses of black spruce and paper birch stood vigil as the sun paled every day until it became a white speck.

Delia travelled west, then south, snagging necessities from deserted homes and shops. Her appearance transformed—she wore layers of wool and

flannel, high-dollar pro ski goggles, an all-weather parka, snow pants, and thick boots. Her tent, boxes of food, water, and medical supplies went loaded into a banana sled courtesy of a military surplus store. She acquired a light hunting rifle and taught herself to use it, in case worse came to worst. She didn't have a plan other than to travel until she found her way back to a more familiar version of reality. Or to walk until she keeled over; whichever came first.

In the beginning, she hated it. That changed over the weeks and months as the suburban softness gave way to a metallic finish. Survival can transition into a lifestyle. She sheltered inside houses and slept on beds. She burned furniture for warmth. However, the bloodstains disquieted her as did eerie noises that wafted from basements and attics during the bleak A.M. hours. She eventually camped outdoors among the woodland creatures who shunned abandoned habitations of humankind as though city limits demarcated entry to an invisible zone of death. The animals had a point, no doubt.

Speaking of animals. Wild beasts haunted the land in decent numbers. Domestic creatures were extinct, seemingly departed to wherever their human masters currently dwelled. With the exception of the other Atticus. The dog lurked on the periphery of her vision; a blur in the undergrowth, a rusty patch upon the snow. At night he dropped mangled ptarmigans and rabbits at the edge of her campfire light. He kept his distance, watching over her as she slept. The musk of his gore-crusted fur, the rawness of his breath, infiltrated her dreams.

In other dreams, her mother coalesced for a visit. *Now it can be said. Your father murdered eight prostitutes before lung cancer cut him down. The police never suspected that sweet baby-faced sonofabitch. You were onto him, somehow.* She woke with a start and the other Atticus's eyes reflected firelight a few yards to her left in the gauze of darkness that enfolded the world.

"Thanks for the talk, Mom."

Delia continued to walk and pull the sled. Sometimes on a road, or with some frequency, on a more direct route through woods and over water. She didn't encounter any human survivors, nor any tracks or other sign.

However, she occasionally glimpsed crystallized hands and feet jutting from a brush pile, or an indistinct form suspended in the translucent depths of a lake. She declined to investigate, lowered her head and marched onward.

One late afternoon, near spring, but not quite, J (dressed in black camo and Army-issue snowshoes) leaped from cover with a merry shriek and knocked her flat. He lay atop her and squeezed her throat inexorably, his eyes sleepy with satisfaction.

"If it were my decision, I'd make you a pet. You don't belong here, sugar pie." He well and truly applied his brutish strength. Brutish strength proved worthless. His expression changed as terror flooded in and his grip slackened. "Oh, my god. I didn't know. They didn't warn me…"

Her eyes teared and she regarded him as if through a pane of water. Her eyes teared because she was laughing so hard. "Too late, asshole. Years and years too late." She brushed his hands aside. "I'm the second kind."

He scrambled to his feet and ran across fresh powder toward the woods as fast as his snowshoes could carry him, which wasn't very. She retrieved the rifle, chambered a round, and tracked him with the scope. A moving target proved more challenging than plinking at soda bottles and pie tins. Her first two shots missed by a mile.

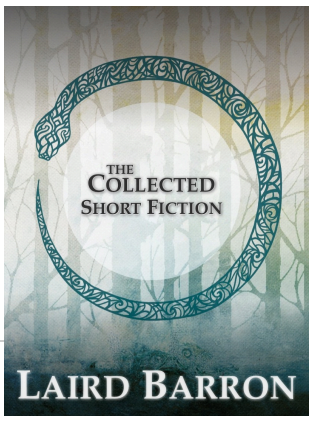
Delia made camp; then she hiked over to J and dragged him back. He gazed at her adoringly, arms trailing in the snow. He smiled an impossibly broad, empty smile. That night, the fire crackled and sent small stars homeward. J grinned and grinned, his body limp as a mannikin caught in the snarled boughs of a tree where she'd strung him as an afterthought. The breeze kicked up into a chinook that tasted of green sap and thawing earth.

"Everything will be different tomorrow," she said to the flames, the changing stars. Limbs creaked to and fro and J nodded, nodded; slavishly agreeable. His shadow and the shadow of the tree limbs spread grotesquely across the frozen ground.

The wind carried to her faint sounds of the dog gnawing and slurping at a blood-drenched snowbank. The wind whispered that Atticus would slake himself and then creep into the receding darkness, gone forever. Where she was headed, he couldn't follow.

“So, while there’s time, let’s have a talk,” Delia said to Grinning J. “When we make it home, tell me where I can find more boys just like you.”

We Used Swords In The 70s



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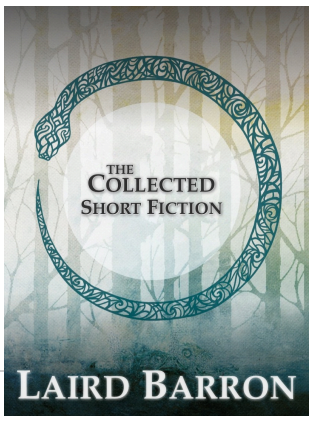
Ode to Joad the Toad



This version taken from *Miscreations: Gods, Monstrosities and Other Horrors* (FEBRUARY 2020).

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Interesting times came to the city of many names, namely the Old Capitol.

King Mingy's bastard son, Larry, mounted the throne on the second Friday of the Month of the Dead—nine days of state mourning after the old king succumbed to advanced years and a white-hot iron shoved up his ass.

Long live the King!

Sunday evening, a buxom maid tended the royal instrument while two of her cohorts pinned young Larry's skinny arms. A fourth sawed off the head his Majesty should've been using more assiduously.

Long live the King!

Monday afternoon witnessed a blaze of trumpets and the flourish of banners to commemorate the ascension of King Richard Creely IV to the Lion Throne. Fresh graffiti in Ball Cutter Alley declared, *Dick is King!* Something few would argue. Except for whomever had scribbled, *Off with his head!* and *Kick against the pricks!*

Two figures lurked at the far end of the alley; a popular rendezvous for nefarious sorts. A short man, and a tall, toad-ish, something-other-than-man, at least a broadax haft wide. These worthies regarded the Piss Wall and its timely message.

"The maids are dealt with," the small one said to the wall. Sneaky Bob wore a raggedy cloak and boots, but a fancy doublet and hose beneath. He'd come directly from his apartments above one of the city's finer brothels, which, not coincidentally, had provided the "maids" who ushered King Larry into the Underworld.

“How dealt is dealt?” Walther Neck said. Words emerged from the wattles of his throat as a rusty blade grinds forth from its sheath. As a consequence, while he often spoke at length, he seldom raised his voice and seldom needed to do so.

“Bottom of the bay, chained to an anchor,” Sneaky Bob said. “Cut ’em and dumped ’em over the side myself.” His smirk projected the idea that he didn’t favor women despite, or because of, his close association with them.

“This is good to hear.”

Neck’s physiognomy appeared toadish because he was in fact an Ur toad, which meant he was a venerable exemplar of toad-kind, yet infinitely more. The gods had gifted Ur (supreme among animals) with speech and reasoning, and empathy toward humanity that did not necessarily equal love. Possessed of the relative mass of a grizzly bear, Neck moved slowly and ponderously, except for those moments when he didn’t. He favored a moldering black coyote pelt (skinned from Prowl, King of the Coyotes) and horrid cork boots of amphibian leather, though he required neither furs nor boots. He also carried a notched khopesh forged from a petrified slab of wood. Equally unnecessary unless he wished to fell a small tree or quarter an elk, which he sometimes did.

At the moment, he regarded his human companion and waited with patience honed from eons of cautious observance. Ur were savage as any beast; humans were masters of treachery. One could never be too safe around a man, especially a man who despised his fellows.

Many hands made light work of a *coup d’état*. Sneaky Bob’s mitts had gotten particularly dirty. He’d arranged the most intimate details of the royal assassination and several others that followed. High lords decreed the time and place; Bob had selected who and how. Meanwhile, Walther Neck’s task in the grand scheme of political reorganization was to resolve delicate personnel matters—mainly overseeing the severance of certain employees. Bob was the last name on Neck’s list.

“I pray the seneschal is satisfied.” Sneaky Bob referred to the King’s right-hand hatchet man, Seneschal Geld. The Seneschal owed Sneaky Bob a knapsack of golden lions for services rendered. Which meant, as the seneschal’s agent in this matter, *Neck* owed Sneaky Bob a knapsack of

golden lions. Forebodingly, there was neither knapsack nor gold on Neck's person.

"The Kingdom is grateful for your sacrifice." The Ur toad's thin-lipped smile broadened. He rotated his unnervingly prodigious cranium to orient upon his tiny compatriot.

"Twas nothing," Sneaky Bob said. Between one breath and the next, *he* was nothing.

Come rosy-nippled dawn, Neck expelled shreds of a raggedy cloak, fancy doublet, and hose into the gutter of Eyebolt Passage. This alley bored into the mountain spine. The mountain carried the city upon its back. Stalactites oozed evil rainwater. Friezes depicted leering amphibian horrors (exceedingly toad-like) that once dwelt Below. Primitive tribes of men carved them, and worse.

Wind gusted through the alley. Dead leaves from the Royal Park whirled around his shoulders and added their number to the bed of mulch and slime and the fossilized skeletons of animals and men. He waddled forth to get drunk at a tavern and cogitate upon what he suspected to be his own imminent doom.

The Jackdaw Tavern was one of a baker's dozen similarly designated establishments scattered around the Old Capitol. This being the Month of the Dead, and thus against custom to sally forth sans costume, the proprietor assumed Neck's awful visage to be an artfully crafted mask. Neck rented a cell on the second floor. He licked a vat of curds and pleasured himself desultorily. The curds were fermented from the tainted blood-milk of rats that dwelt in the sewers. The rats surfaced at night to steal garbage and strip inebriated vagrants to the bone.

Neck was old as the Ur measure such things, perhaps old as rocks and trees measure such things. He recalled but fragments of his voluminous history. Had his existence always been so squalid? He committed an array of dirty deeds for meager pay. Hatchet jobs. Murder. Mayhem. Skullduggery. Prostitution. He made a terrible prostitute. His Bidder's Organ followed its own star and Neck was down to mate whenever the opportunity presented

itself. Alas, altering sex taxed the Ur-toad and he usually went into hibernation upon accomplishing the deed.

He squatted before a minor altar to Joad, patron deity of toads great and small, and other, less savory creatures of the bogs and swamps. This was a wooden effigy, nothing akin to the colossal mural in the Hall of Doom that depicted insatiable Joad as a behemoth, its tongue drooling down to the dirt, scores of men caught fast in its barbs like flies dying in amber. Not a popular deity, to be sure.

Hours burned away as Neck stoically awaited word from Seneschal Geld as per his instructions. The two had met in the flesh but once, many years gone by when the seneschal swam with the little pollywogs at the court of good King Mingy. Oh, how times changed. A man of Geld's current status did not treat personally with mercenary scum, lest it be by dead of night and in the presence of numerous heavily armed guards. Therefore, Neck anticipated contact with a trusted emissary of the seneschal; i.e., a professional murderer. That's how the great web and its functionaries worked—one man to arrange assassinations and then to murder the assassins; another man to liquidate the first fellow; and a third to take care of *him*.

Where would it all end? With a knock on the door and an envenomed dagger stabbed through his slow-beating heart, is what Neck suspected. Seneschal Geld preferred loose threads to be snipped. The powerful always did.

Shadows of clouds moved against the window. The gray gloom of his niche blackened at the edges and curled inward until only the last trace of light glimmered in the pitiless rhinestone eyes of the idol.

Where will it end, indeed? The altar of Joad whispered from many directions at once. That voice, like the creak of sun-whitened leather, sounded as familiar as Neck's own. *For you, it ends in a pot of bubbling oil and seasonal spices unless divine providence intervenes. Have you been keen? Have you said your prayers? I haven't heard from you since that sticky incident with the Croatoans.*

Neck had been neither keen nor faithful. The only prayers he attended were those of his victims who occasionally babbled for mercy before their pitiable souls were snatched into the Underworld. He also attended the

gurgling of his bowels where damned souls occasionally simmered and stewed.

You've done it now.

"The oppression of Mingy had grown intolerable," Neck quoted the sentiment of nobles and peasants who'd chafed under the old king's increasingly burdensome yoke.

But why, small fry?

"May as well ask why a man peels a scab. It's an impulse."

You're no man.

"Yet, here I squat in his rude habitation observing his customs. Digesting his humor and habit, no less."

Thanks to your meddling, the kingdoms of men shall endure naught but woe. Dick will see to it.

Verily, King Dick represented an existential threat to peasants and paupers everywhere his scabrous hand extended. Cruel beyond the usual measure, even for a mortal tyrant who were forced to pack every conceivable iniquity into their flea-span lives, the king would happily usher in a new dark age of fire and destruction and political whoredom.

"You're welcome," Neck said, drunk on the vile curds and his own rank fatalism. "Consider it a favor. Down with primates, eh?"

Don't presume me any favors. Perhaps "you" bear these primates enmity. I rather enjoy their antics. Joad's altar emanated a suggestive slurp.

Easy for a god older than the mountains to adopt a sanguine view. It had presided when creation was a soupy mess that spanned pole to pole. It had known worms and mollusks and trilobites as supplicants. It would persist for eons after other lifeforms gave way to cockroaches scurrying beneath a reddening sun. Meanwhile, the blight known as mankind spread across the countenance of the earth, virulent as mold through the meat of an overripe peach. Men slew Those Who Came Before or drove them into the low caverns where neither celestial light nor rain were ever felt.

The Ur, such as Neck, risked much to walk abroad. His mostly extinct kind did so only by the forbearance of lords of men. Ur perforce served human princes and kings as advisors and executioners, and, alas, toadies.

You are despised, it is true, the wooden god said. *Those who know their history fear you. Those who know you fear you. Hate you. Even Geld. Especially Geld. Especially Dick.*

"If they only knew how little they know," Neck said to the altar, to himself. A coal ignited in his belly; dull and dim, then rapidly brightening to the incandescent heat of a torturer's best iron. His eyes teared and for the first time in epochs, he heard the north wind sighing through the reeds of his distant home estuary. He smelled the brine of tidal water and he smelled green bird shit.

The altar fattened on liquid darkness and his misery. Long had Neck harbored greedy phantoms of inconsolable yearning and pitiless regret. Long and longer had he suffered guilt and self-reproach like perpetual festering wounds.

When you were voiding your bowels in Eyebolt Passage this lovely morn, did you perchance hearken the clink of a mostly dissolved vial as it vented from your nether port and rolled into the gutter?

"I fancied Bob carried a bottle of scent. My innards smell quite pleasant, I trow."

Bob did NOT *carry a bottle of scent. Bob carried a vial of rare and deadly poison called Sanguine Dream Eater, several drops of which he intended to spice your curds at the first chance.*

Few natural poisons or venoms upon the gods' good earth could affect the constitution of iron-gutted Neck. He was, so far as he had reason to believe by dint of brutal experience, immune to the worst effects of every foul, toxic material devised by man or nature except ennui. Indeed, when aroused, he exuded a toxic slime capable of inducing a hypnogogic state, nausea, and death. Victims reported an orgy of phantasmal imagery prior to their demise.

"Who would provide Bob such a rare potion for fell purpose?"

Someone who wishes to send you home. Someone wise enough to know you don't poison an Ur-toad, nay THE Ur-toad; you poison reality itself. The ultimate trip! My guess? A king or his seneschal.

“It was a rhetorical question.” Neck understood precisely what had befallen him—he’d been commanded to destroy Sneaky Bob and leave no trace. The seneschal, knowing full well the manner in which Neck typically assayed the disappearance of his victims, would snip two loose ends for the price of one. “Are vivid … hallucinations … the first stage?” Neck waved his paw and his claws briefly multiplied.

Time is a ring. You will meet the Terrible Shadow on High once more. I am sorry it has come to this.

“That makes two of us. Tell me what I must do, O hopping god.” Though it sounded familiar, Neck couldn’t remember the precise connotation of the Terrible Shadow on High. The phrase smacked of mystical gobbledygook used to frighten peasants. “Mighty Joad? Hello?”

The altar spoke no more, although a strong reek of bog remained in the garret. Neck vomited a steaming pile of curds. He lighted a candle and blearily contemplated the mess with the concentration of a haruspex.

A distant screech resounded; and again, closer. Green light seeped through the window. Shadows dissolved. The gaseous swampy stench thickened and the ceiling boards creaked. He looked up into the annihilating center of the universe.

A plethora of horrors crept forth to mingle with gentlefolk during the Month of the Dead. Costumes, greasepaint glamour, and expectations concealed the nature of these entities. First, Neck had entered the Jackdaw Tavern, his hideous form unremarked by neither proprietor nor patrons. Sometime later, five Men of the Flat Affect arrived, accompanied by a young woman. The men were likewise treated with affable diffidence despite their most unwholesome physiognomies. Common folk scarcely recognized them for what they truly were, particularly in broad daylight. The White Ones tended to lurk at the twilight margins; given to haunting lakeside cabins, abandoned asylums, and rural knolls popular with lust-crazed teenagers.

None could authoritatively derive the origin of these creatures. Rumors abounded: They had died, as mortal men usually do, then were reassembled

and resurrected by the gods of death; they were mortal men, perfectly alive, but enslaved by enchanted masks; or they were an immortal servitor species marooned when their star-faring ship crashed on Earth and now emerged from crevices at the bidding of eminent black magicians such as Julie V, Satan's own bitch, and Jon Foot, erstwhile warlock to the Imperial Court. Whatever the truth of their provenance, Men of the Flat Affect, or White Ones, resembled typical men, except for visages sickly pale as clabbered milk, an unnerving rictus, and shambling gait that covered more ground than an untutored observer might warrant.

The Pale Society, as scholars designated their plurality, was divided between the Ecstatics, whose evil grins permanently curved unto their ears, and the Stoics, who were blank and cold as the very snows. Men of the Flat Affect spoke solely to lure victims from sanctuary and into darkness. They possessed no scrutable motivations save a love of sadism and murder.

This cruelty consisted of three Ecstatics and two Stoics, each yoked in servitude to the aforementioned woman, Delia Labrador. Delia wore a woolen cloak and a gemstone-encrusted domino mask. Her lips were blacked with ash. She sat at a table near the hearth, her scaly sandals propped most cavalierly. The White Ones loomed around her, their eyes gleaming with dispassionate malice.

Delia inquired of the proprietor whether he'd seen anyone interesting. She sought a man of superior bulk and rude countenance. A man who smelled of alkaline and the blood caked on his boots.

The proprietor pointed directly overhead and confessed he'd rented a cell to precisely such an enormous brute. Positively frightful, positively feculent.

"Did this gentleman perchance wear the mask and garb of Joad the Inimical, dread god of toads and a thousand slithering beasts?"

"As you say, lass."

"I am infinitely more experienced than these rosy cheeks suggest," she said. "Your bearing is that of a soldier. A footman from the minor tarot."

"Many days loafing and a few hogsheads of beer ago, yeah."

“Grace me with a soldier’s appraisal. What did you make of your squatty guest? Is he a warrior? Would he strike fear in your heart on a field of battle?”

“Perhaps, ma’am, as a backstabbing scout. He’s awful light-footed for a man of his bulk. Yeah, come to think of it, he trod softly as Slaughin’s own shadow.”

“Thank you, innkeeper. Sleep well and dream a red dream of butchery in the name of your old king.” She smiled. “Oh, and my apologies for the once and future mess.”

The proprietor’s gaze shifted from the girl to her entourage and back again. He sidled away in the manner of a fighting crab.

Delia nodded to the Stoics who immediately lurched in tandem up the rickety stairs. White Ones typically perambulated as if directed by an amateur puppeteer’s hand. She massaged her temples and awaited the inevitable outcry. This was the essence of her professional existence—auguries and dowsing to track prey; the casting of wards and charms; the deployment of her killers; support where necessary, although the White Ones tended to be a fire and forget proposition. Sic them upon a victim and profit.

She’d received the commission to eradicate Neck the Violator earlier that morning via a dead letter drop. The commission, labeled an emergency, did not enumerate Neck’s offenses (many of which were common knowledge to denizens of the city’s underworld) or whom longed for his death (it would’ve required ten men and a boy to tote such a scroll!), nor did Delia give a rotten fig. Neck represented an exorbitantly lucrative contract, and nothing more. Ur beasts were fearsome, but few living creatures could withstand the attentions of the White Ones. The cruelty she’d brought were exceptionally formidable and would make short work of the toad, his reputation notwithstanding.

For an exquisitely pregnant interval, nothing perceptible happened upstairs. Then, blood welled from ceiling planks and dripped onto the table, spattering her sandals. The Ecstatics cocked their heads and regarded this phenomenon with intense diffidence.

Time passed and more blood dripped, but the Stoics did not return.

“We’d best see what’s keeping your brethren,” Delia said with strained nonchalance. In an abundance of caution, she donned three extra murder rings, each set with a death’s head gemstone attuned to a particular medium of slaughter. These stones complemented the settings of her bejeweled belt and the master death’s head. Power swelled in her middle; power crackled in her delicate fists. The servitors proceeded her, naturally. Each of them was armed with a skinning knife, cleaver, or mallet. Rusty, jagged, and lethal.

Once, at least seventy or eighty years ago, a wealthy, albeit naïve, patron inquired how a nice girl like Delia became a black magician. She lacked the marks of discernment as popularized in literature—she wasn’t a hag nor a be-goateed warlock. Her supple rosy flesh was un-scarified. Neither of her shapely ankles was attached to a hoof.

Delia said, *A toad resided in our family garden. Beastly, malevolent creature. It ate sparrows that flew too near. I was a child and believed in the fairytale of kissing frogs as a method to disenchant cursed princes. Much too late, did I recall that the tale made no mention of toads. Our tongues intertwined and its viscid bile burned my core. Light and purity were seared to crisps. The rest is the rest.*

That same patron then asked how she’d fallen in with the Men of the Flat Affect.

Simple. A cruelty of their ilk raped and murdered me, unaware that this violation transpired according to my own design. As such matters predictably follow, I arose via true resurrection and now own their souls forevermore.

The inquisitive patron made no further inquiries.

Ascending the stairs these many years later, she could be forgiven in indulging a morbid notion that her story had come full circle. The bitter taste in her mouth sharpened and a thread of drool unraveled along her chin. The fingernails of her left hand blackened as the murder rings sparked and sizzled.

Upstairs, a short, narrow passage extended too far and at a peculiar, canted angle, as though Delia and her entourage had entered the hold of a foundering ship. She glanced over her shoulder; the stairwell fumed with an aqueous green glow. Her breath caught. Her reactions lagged heartbeats behind the languid unfolding of events. She'd experienced variations of this nightmare on numerous occasions—a pitiful insect trapped in a glob of stiffening amber while a scarcely imaginable doom approached to snuff her life.

The second door on the left was ajar. Its opening brimmed with unnatural darkness. Stars and planets and capes of celestial dust could've swooped through this slice of void, so deep, dark, and cold. No glints of stellar fire winked from within, however.

Delia had studied eldritch portals in the Eleven Grimoires of Revulsion, Compulsion, and Repulsion. Such ruptures contravened physical laws of material reality and spanned immense distances as causeways between worlds, between galaxies. Some wormholes cored even farther, crossing into the Great Dark where flesh and brain represented provender for The Sleeping Dread. In either case, to cross the threshold was to court severe peril.

The Ecstatics flew off their feet and into the void; minnows yanked by the hook and line of a cosmic fisherman. She initiated a sign of greater warding. Too little, too late. A terrible force like constricting iron bands crushed her arms against her sides and shot her at velocity into the bottomless pit. Frigid wind shrilled. Her tears froze against her cheeks.

She comforted herself with a mantra.

I have known death and resurrection. And she fell, blinded in the darkness.

I have supped the black milk of the Gorgon and uttered her Profane Ululations. And she fell.

I have bent the will of the White Ones to my own. And she fell.

Julie V kissed my sandal. And she fell.

Jon Foot is my bitch. And she fell.

Delia had memorized twenty-three Greater and thirty-nine Minor Signs of Celestial Malice. Six names of demon kings quivered the tip of her tongue.

None of these could save her, for she sensed her patrons were beyond communion. Consumed with mindless fear she could utter naught but an inchoate cry.

The sensation of plummeting ceased, instantly, seamlessly. She caught her balance, opened her eyes, and beheld the bland confines of a typical inn chamber, albeit marred by a pool of coagulating blood and the missing street-side wall which gave way to a panorama of slimy, towering mandrake and giant ferns (instead of shit-filled gutters and shit-spattered buildings). Mist oozed over beds of variegated moss. Birds warbled and chattered. Insects whirred in endless, stinging hunger; they clouded the surface of a sluggish river. She inhaled the rank humidity, tasting ancient bark and hints of spoilage. Here was a Verdant Hell of hermit philosophers—a reeking, fecund everglade, primeval as the fang of a dinosaur.

This everglade did not reside in any civilized region of the Empire. Civilization, so-called, was loath to suffer the existence of a man-eating garden within its confines. She beheld no sign of her erstwhile companions who might protect her against lurking predatory fauna. Had they dissolved during transit, or (scant difference) vanished into the gullet of a prehistoric reptile? Whence the sticky pool of blood? Thinking more clearly by the moment, she decided that moving away from the scene might be prudent, as scavengers and carnivores alike were certain to converge.

Delia walked parallel to the river, traversing hummocks and half-submerged logs, avoiding quicksand and fetid pools swarming with sickeningly large mosquitos. The fates of her entourage became apparent, by and by. She spied the mangled corpse of a Stoic depending from the boughs of a mangrove tree. A crocodile lazily chomped on the smirking remains of an Ecstatic. Bits of the others lay scattered from hell to breakfast. Likely sufficient disparate pieces to reassemble her slaves into grisly patchworks given a fortnight or so. Their kind was nigh indestructible, although they could be severely inconvenienced by the usual methods. Unlike the White Ones, *she* would not regenerate if reduced to a spool of guts and remnant fingers. She moved a trifle faster.

The white disk of a sun hung motionless behind its veil of clouds. Reality distorted here; time moved as slowly as the blood within the terrible lizards who drowsed in the reeds. In due course she emerged to behold a delta.

Brackish water slopped near her toes. The water curved away into a milky haze, its expanse dappled by the breeze. Several crocodiles (more enormous than the specimen who'd eaten her death slave) lazed upon the delta; bloated logs decorating the tidal grounds of a ruined mansion.

"Neck has imbibed a dose of *Sanguine Dream Eater*." She picked a gnat from her teeth with a knifelike thumbnail. "That is the only explanation. It is also the worst explanation." Where she'd landed was no more important than when. *Dream Eater* came in a dozen flavors, each more esoteric than the last. All varieties were capable of damaging the imbiber and his or her personal reality, but as a bonus effect, *Sanguine Dream Eater* scorched holes in the very fabric of space and time as it existed within the dreamer. Thus, the wormhole and this prehistoric jungle destination. She'd gone backward in time thousands, perhaps tens-of-thousands of years. The poison's nature also predicated a dreadful intimacy—the surroundings would undoubtedly bear personal relevance to Neck. No one ever truly escaped his or her provenance.

"The great toad spawned here," she said. "Eons gone by, he frolicked in this stew as a merry polliwog. Not a twatting care in the world. Thanks to his carnivorous predilections, here I tarry."

Do you not recognize your own home? She snapped her head around and saw nothing but tall grass. Either her inner demons whispered in a chorus, or the Dark Powers spoke to her on the wind. She regarded the ruins and their guardian lizards. Many years had passed and the mansion's dereliction was severe, so she but slowly twigged to the voice's insinuation that this was her childhood abode.

You penetrated the membrane, her inner demons said. *Your blood, your marrow, your animating force comingled with Walther Neck's effluvium—and not for the first time! Behold his Paradise and Purgatory for it is your very own—*

"Enough." Delia made a ward against malignant genius loci and supernatural possession and silenced the voice. She slashed a thick sapling with her flinty nails, and it toppled. She forged the narrow delta channel, probing ahead with her impromptu staff. The nearest albino crocodiles caught wind of her scent and hastily flopped into the water.

Such a luxurious mansion in its heyday. She wandered its marshy halls, ceiling open to the heavens. Father had been a moderately wealthy freeman. He and Mother protested the policies of someone a bit too high up the food chain, organized a peasant rebellion (really a glorified work slowdown), and were branded dissident traitors for their pains. Father lost his estate prior to his execution. The aggrieved nobility shipped Mother north as a trained slave. She placed Delia in the care of a distant relative; her final, desperate act. The relative, a strange, bloody-minded woman, was an occultist who'd endured the tutelage of several grand masters and was found wanting. However, the occultist recognized Delia's aptitude regarding the dark arts. The child's course was set.

And now …

Walther Neck sprawled in the backyard where a magnificently-tended garden had rioted into a jungle. He lay as still as the dead, his left paw locked onto the throat of a Stoic. Splinters of bone protruded from the Stoic's limbs. Its staring wet eyes swam with gnats. Mindlessly loyal to the bitter end, it had expired pursuing her quarry.

Delia could have revived her minion with a finger snap—although the result might've proved more interesting had the Ur swallowed her pet. She poised to make the gesture and utter the fateful syllables. Neck coughed. His grotesque bulk shuddered. He pushed the corpse aside and laboriously rolled to his knees. That brought him and Delia to approximately the same height.

"So, we meet again," she said. "You look terrible."

He glared at her. "Says the goth chick with the lazy eye and bad makeup." His breath was a pungent cocktail of half-digested carrion, hot offal, and poison.

"And that voice …"

"We can't all be silver-tongued devils like Rabbit Abbot." He knew she was right. It pained him, nonetheless.

"Rabbit Abbot isn't a name I recall."

"Exactly. And you've never crossed my path either. I'd remember your attitude."

“As a young toad, you dwelt near the foot of yon vine-entangled fountain.” She retreated several steps and opened her hand. “I held you in my palm.”

“Hate to be the bearer of ill-tidings, crazy lady—I haven’t been a “young” anything since the Bald Mountains were pointy and the East and West Continents were a vast, swampy plate.”

“We kissed. It did not end well.”

“If you can’t discern the difference between a frog and a toad, you were doomed at the outset.” He climbed upright. His shadow fell over her. “I’m dying a slow, horrible death via poison. The pain is exacerbated by this tedious conversation.”

“Yes, yes, you swallowed a dose of *Sanguine Dream Eater*,” she said. “I suspect that Mr. or Mrs. X became anxious, fearing a delayed reaction meant you’d either avoided the poison or were immune. He or she sent me to finish the job.”

“Mr. X? Oh, no mystery in that regard. Seneschal Geld decided to terminate my services now that the royal coup is accomplished.”

“That asshole. I wondered who could afford the extravagance of SDE. There are seven doses left in existence. Er, six doses.”

“You intend to come at me, or what? The sun is going to set in a million years, give or take, and I don’t want to miss the spectacle.”

Though he didn’t appear to be in any condition to threaten her, Delia maintained a healthy distance as she turned the problem over in her mind. “Here we are at a pretty pass. I hesitate to dispatch your miserable soul to the Great Dark. Due to these exigent circumstances, our fates may be temporarily intertwined.”

“O fortunate me.” Neck peered at the sky. “Don’t take offense when I say that your intentions are the least of my problems.” He pointed at a speck that detached from the sun and floated closer. “You will regret that bit about our intertwined fates. Apologies.”

A hair-raising shriek echoed across the gulf.

Her demons returned with a gleeful monologue. *Time is a ring. The hole in its heart yawns. It is the crack that runs through everything. It is the bottomless pit that nothing can fill. The great toad is expressed in his*

myriad iterations as some believe all men are mere fragments of a singular god.

"What approaches?" she said.

"He who finally noticed our arrival. *The Terrible Shadow that Dwells on High*." He glanced at her. "Heard of him?"

"God of the beasts of the air. Fisher of souls."

"Fisher of *amphibian* souls. And also whomever happens to be standing nearby."

The speck bridged the gap with astonishing velocity, and grew by magnitudes—a monstrously enormous heron surmounted by a hemisphere of glittering shadow, astride a second inverted hemisphere of thunderheads.

The heron to end all herons descended to the mouth of the delta. It might have swallowed an elephant; it might have devoured an army mounted upon elephants. Water boiled to vapor with each crashing beat of its wings that cast shadows across the earth and the water and into the forest. Wind battered Neck and Delia and they were drenched. The heron of herons folded its dripping wings and loomed. Azure head and feathers; crimson-throated, crimson-beaked; midnight black of breast; and eyes of molten gold. Tall as the trees, its bill parted to emit a frightful shriek that caused lesser birds to pelt against the canopy and the crocodiles to hurl themselves into the reeds, tails whipping madly. One lizard rolled over and floated belly-up in the shallows.

Delia went to her knees and bowed her head in instinctive supplication. Neck covered his eyes to ward off flying chaff, and waited for whatever must come.

"Oh, fuck me running," the God of Herons said, nasally and dinful. "I know you, toad. I've had you in my throat, once upon a time."

"That's what your mother—"

"Shut up, be-warted imbecile!" The heron raised his voice and the blast was bonfire-hot and rich with blood and righteous bile. "Let me recount our history. I speared your fecund sire with my bill and drank his nasty juices until naught remained but a warty sack. My mate Agatha feasted upon the rancid innards of your dam. We romantically gazed into one another's eyes

as we gulped the vast, ocher strings of eggs that were your embryonic siblings. We gorged upon the pollywogs who fled in vain beneath the mossy sludge of these ponds. Made it a game of hide-and-seek, in fact. How many wrigglers could I shish kebab at once? Loads!

"But you, you, foul, poisonous, feculent turd on legs! You caught in my throat as your glands oozed a hypnogogic poison, not unlike the *Sanguine Dream Eater* I scent upon you now. Your squamous, vile hide choked me and I spat you into the world. Good riddance, says I. Then I curled into my nest for five-and twenty winters, shitting explosively while regurgitating a bellyful of hapless lesser glade dwellers as I succumbed to a febrile dream of unlife."

Neck wiped the heron's spittle from his misshapen dome and waited for the trees to cease swaying and the roiled waters to calm. "Aloysius, either eat us or fuck off back to your stump."

Aloysius, God of Herons, The Terrible Shadow that Dwells on High, Bloody Bill, and a hundred others, shifted his head side-to-side. "I would, I would, dear slimy brute. Yet, I dare not. You are a piece of meat wriggling beneath my invidious talon, but you are also an aspect of Dread and Awful Joad whom I'd rather not offend. His claws are long, his tongue is longer. As for the semi-mortal, she is human. Worse, she reeks of the White Ones' unlife taint and it riles my gorge. Agatha ate the little shits like Turkish Delight, Green Goddess keep her."

"What does he mean, you're an aspect of Joad?" Delia, still bowed, spoke sotto voce to Neck.

Neck said, "The heron's fearful presence is a purgative of the subconscious. Memories return to me as if gaseous bubbles long suspended in muck rise to the surface of a lake. It sounds correct, although fog remains. I am diminished from a previous life. Greatly diminished."

"Hurrah!" she said. "Are you a toad dreaming you're a god, or the ass-end around?" Her demons hissed, whether in rage or delight, she couldn't tell. "Neck, you gorgeous devil! All becomes clear—you've likely died a thousand deaths, only to reincarnate anew. Albeit with your original form and vestigial memories. You exist as a broken mirror exists. Each scattered

shard reflecting within its frame of reference, yet an inviolate piece of the whole. We might yet quit this backwater oblivion."

"To what purpose? The king desires my head on a stick. You mean to collect the reward. The definition of untenable."

"*Geld* desires your head," Delia said. "Not I. Considering this revelation regarding your provenance, a bag of coin is insufficient. The residual damage of SDE is liable to be ongoing. Which means you may persist as dual iterations simultaneously. God of the Toads and toad. The possibilities are staggering." She poked his chest. "Someone well-versed in esoteric methods must watch over you to ascertain your body and soul remain integrated with corporeal reality."

"I kind of like it here," Neck said. "It's peaceful. Perhaps, I'll rest a while …"

The God of Herons clawed a gout of muddy water into the air. "Forget it, bilious sack! O murderous sucker of slugs! This is my demesne. Your particular acre resides far from these shores, should you crave a return to that benighted realm. Go squat in primacy, over garter snakes and tadpoles. Go in peace or go in pieces. That's the best offer you'll receive today."

"Fine. How do you propose I effect my departure? So far as I can determine, the poison is a one-way trip."

"Soon, the *Sanguine Dream Eater* in your blood shall dissipate," the God of Herons said. "The wound in your mind shall seal. Neither of you belongs in this paradise. You shall be expelled from my demesne as a splinter is ultimately disgorged from its seat in flesh."

Neck regarded Delia. "This is beyond my ken."

She nodded. "Our intrusion has deformed this reality—time and space are out of joint. By all rights, we should rot for eternity or be devoured by a lumbering denizen of the land. However, the god of the everglade wishes us gone, so it shall come to pass. His will is irresistible in his domain. I would expect the earth to open beneath our feet and swallow us at any moment."

"Allow me to assist." The God of Herons pecked at the shore with his executioner's bill. The ground crumbled and fell into a pit. "You'd best be

gone when I return.” He fluffed his plumage and waded into deeper water before launching toward the sky.

Delia and Neck exchanged glances. Since there was nothing for it but to do it, they descended. They rested at the bottom. A tunnel cored into the gloom. Above, the patch of hazy sky winked out like a blown candle and they were sealed in pitch blackness.

Delia gripped his elbow as they moved forward, blindly into the unknown. In a while, a guttural, wheezing cry echoed from the way they’d come. It sounded again, closer. Something enormous must’ve uttered such a cry.

“Dare I ask?” Neck said.

“Faster,” she said. “Lest you meet yourself on the road through purgatory. I am unprepared. His freedom to roam shall be curtailed in our material reality. We must survive to reach it. Haste, toad.”

“I’ve *seen* myself, glorified in the Hall of Doom.” He began moving again, dragging her along. “Joad would be sorely disappointed in what I’ve made of his legacy.”

Delia said nothing.

“One question.” His raspy voice floated strangely in the dark.

“Speak it, toad.”

“Did we really kiss?”

The sands of midnight had recently passed through the hourglass when Seneschal Geld strode into the royal bedchamber sans invitation. Tall and lean, he bowed, bending like a half-opened folding knife. His conical hat of office scraped the tiles.

“Your Majesty, pardon me.”

King Dick, sunk to his chin in an herbal bath, was not amused at the interruption. The king was seldom amused unless the activity related to something pleasurable, such as the complete destruction of one of his countless enemies or detractors.

“Why are you bothering me, Geld? Your expression of acute fear is troublesome. What has gone wrong? I do hope you’ve snipped all loose ends and nothing will come back to haunt us. Please be exceedingly concise as I have no wish to become acquainted with the details of your heinous undertakings.”

“Heinous undertakings on your behalf,” Seneschal Geld said.

“Indeed? You must truly be in the soup to speak with such temerity.”

“The good news, Sire? The “loose ends” are well and snipped, as you say. The bad news? The, er, help in this matter are rather disgruntled. If you take my meaning.”

“Yes. I hear you’ve solicited the talents of a black magician, among other unsavory villains. Kudos on securing the magician—I thought Jon Foote and Julie V were the last of that ilk for another generation or two. Never mind. How does this concern me?”

“Assassins threaten my person,” Seneschal Geld said. He’d not seen a Flat Affect Man prior to tonight. However, when a Stoic had emerged from behind a colonnade, there could’ve been scant doubt as to its purpose or ability. “The miscreants lurk within the palace itself. As your loyal and trusted servant, it would stand to reason that my problems are inevitably your problems. Sire.”

King Dick scooped soap into his hand and blew a bubble. “Dear Geld, as of this moment, your position is vacant. Hie thee into town and take lodgings wherever you deem fit. Wait for the herald to announce a call for candidates. I’d say a tenday at minimum. Perhaps a fortnight. If your head rests upon your shoulders at such time, please be welcome to submit yourself with the other applicants.”

“Sire—”

“IF you are not beheaded, Mr. Geld. Or worse. My money is on something worse.”

Seneschal Geld didn’t bother to plead his case. King Dick’s favorite bodyguards waited outside the door and would cheerfully cleave the seneschal from stem to stern if their master so much as whistled.

“As you say, Sire.” He bowed again as protocol demanded, and hastily departed for his own chambers to retrieve a satchel of personal items before making good his escape.

A draft moaned in the corridors of power. Lamps were spaced at lonely intervals. Seneschal Geld bunched his robes in his hands and hustled, aware that some grim fate pursued him.

Indeed, an Ecstatic blocked the passage back. The seneschal ducked into a doorway and fled through a series of unlighted antechambers. The palace was a honeycomb of levels piled upon levels that few had ever fully explored. It sprawled with disorienting grandeur and he soon lost his way. No matter what door he opened or what hall he traveled, a White One was there to chivvy him along, down short stairwells, then longer, narrower stairwells connected by longer, narrower, less illuminated passages. First dust, then moss and mold and dripping water as stone roughened and cracked with antiquity. No matter that he broke into a trot, then a panicked gallop, a White One paced him with a queer, shuffling gait.

Finally, he staggered, gasping and spent, into a decrepit cathedral lighted by a pair of iron braziers. The braziers seethed and simmered with red coals. Broad flagstone steps descended to a shallow basin at the heart of the chamber. Ankle-deep water rippled, disturbed by the flow of hidden spring. A scaly plinth, surmounted by a rusted iron hexagonal pyramid, rose from the center of the basin.

The temple walls were formed of basalt. Weird red shadows crawled across weirder stone and plaster effigies of neglected gods. The Heron; the Toad; the Leech; the Sleeper; the Lord of the Black River; and the FatherMother. These figures towered within alcoves that nearly scraped the vaulted ceiling.

There were no visible entrances besides the archway. A trio of White ones slouched at the threshold, content to observe Geld’s escalating terror. They grinned and scowled, perfectly still, perfectly content.

A dripping, squelching eructation caused the braziers to gutter. Geld turned even as the distended, lolling tongue of Joad drooled forth, its barbs

scraping over stone. He sprang backward, but the reeking flesh coiled around him, its barbs pierced him, and he gasped in pleasure or agony; both are the same. He was drawn upward, kicking and squirming toward a monstrous bulk shed of its plaster shell.

This isn't as grand as the Hall of Doom, Joad whispered in the seneschal's mind. *But it's a decent likeness*.

King Dick nibbled a fig. He sipped wine from a gem-encrusted goblet. He said, "Well, I suppose that's the last anyone will ever see of the pointy-headed bastard. Unfortunately, I'm down a seneschal. He was pretty effective, too. He absolutely terrified the staff."

Nearby shadows dissolved at the merest hint of unearthly radiance to reveal Delia in repose upon a pile of silk cushions. She too munched on figs and enjoyed a lovely goblet of wine.

"Don't think of it as losing a seneschal. Think of it as gaining a court magician."

"And a … whatever in the Nineteen Hells your friend is," the king said.

"An exquisitely dangerous pet."

"As you say. Meanwhile, the bath grows tepid. Perhaps you'd care to fetch that fluffy towel and dry off the royal fundament?" His smirk faded as he noticed the water in his tub was rather inky. It stained the marble a deep, rich crimson. He wondered if he should call for his guards, if it would make a difference.

The faint glow suffusing Delia's flesh drained into her eyes and they briefly flared, metallic purple. Then her eyes too dimmed and dimmed and she sank into the shadows.

"Er, tell me more about our burgeoning friendship," the king said to make conversation.

"It isn't going to be anything like you imagine," she said.

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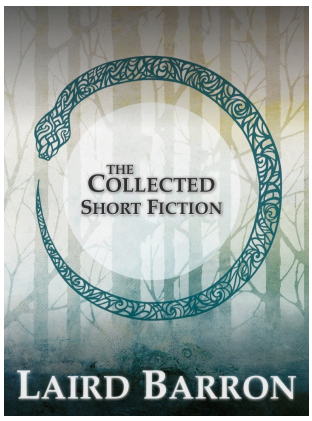

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